

BY JAMES WHITFIELD ELLISON

I'm

Gwen

Harrison

Harding

A NOVEL

L.O.H.H.
Price, \$3.50

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He was a fairly typical adolescent, brought up in an average Michigan town, with no particular talents except a gift for fantasy, a working knowledge of the sousaphone, and a keen nose for phonies. His parents didn't seem to get along too well; his father owned a bookshop and drank too much, his mother was in failing health. But though Owen was gradually becoming aware of his parents as individuals, his chief interest still lay in his friends Pooch, Deacon, and Bill.

Owen's story begins on the first day of high school—a bad day for new freshmen and one heavy with apprehension. The seniors at Cornell High were traditionally bloodthirsty, and Owen and his friends were trying to figure out ways to escape what promised to be a rough time. It proved to

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I'm Owen Harrison Harding

Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1955

I'm
Owen
Harrison
Harding

by James Whitfield Ellison

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First Edition

Designed by Diana Klemin

This book and
my love
for the *Ellison Family*
and for
Virginia

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I'm Owen Harrison Harding

Me and Pooch Miller and Deacon and Herby stood around while Bill Butler gave us the scoop on what to do our first day. We were pretty worried because Slim Boverman, some dumb cousin of Deacon's, said he was going to get us when we got to high school, and the football team would be right in there behind him. I figured that the best idea was to find out where the nearest can was that had a door you could lock. Anyway Bill was saying,

"Watch your step, you guys, they're out to smear us. Slim'll be hot out after me because I was president of our class. That's the way they always play it—they always love to get the hot shots." Bill looked around at us to see if we agreed with him. He had his chin sticking out a mile like he'd take a poke at anybody who didn't agree with him. I sort of shrugged my shoulders like I didn't agree with him, but he didn't look at me. "Now what we gotta do," he went on, "is fool the bastards."

"How d'you expect to do that?" Herby said. "Just not go to school all year?"

To see the stupid expression on Bill's face when Herby said that, with that very innocent look of his, was worth standing out in the cold for. And I was damn near freezing to death.

"Keep quiet," Deacon told Herby. "Bill's prob'ly got a plan."

Plan my ass! It's about all that guy can do planning how to get to school in the morning, and that's so true I'd swear it on a stack of bibles.

"Go ahead, Billy," Deacon said.

I looked at Pooch. Pooch wasn't saying anything, as usual. He was just standing there listening to all of us sound off. Pooch is tall, blond and good-looking and he never has a whole lot to say, and it isn't because he's dumb either. He's not so dumb. Any guy who can stand around all his life and watch other people make idiots out of themselves is pretty smart. And that's the kind of guy Pooch is. Very, very clever.

"Listen," Bill hollered, "I'm not gonna help you guys out unless you keep it down a little. I can't hear myself think."

Just one more word about Bill. Bill was president of our class in

junior high school, and if you think being president of our class had anything to do with brains you're out of your head. The reason Bill can't hear himself think is because he can't think. And another thing about Bill, Bill is so conceited he'll constantly drive you crazy. Why, he happens to be God's one and only gift to women. And if you don't believe it ask him. He'll write you thirty-five books on how he's God's gift to women, and he'll tell as many lies as he can in every one of them.

"I think we oughta hide in the johns," Bill said. "And don't go staring around at everything like you've never been inside a high school before. Keep your eyes peeled for seniors, and if you see one, take off like a big ass bird." Bill looked us up and down, one at a time. "Any questions?" he said.

"I've got one," I said. "Where the hell were you hiding when they passed out the brains?"

"What's the matter, Harding?" Bill said. He looked very P Od. "You seem to think you know more about these things than I do. Well, shoot then."

He stuck a piece of gum in his mouth and didn't offer the package around.

"It's not that I know more," I said; "it's just that you don't know anything. In the first place no matter what we do they'll get us sooner or later. If we hide in the cans, they'll take our pants off and stick them down the toilet." Pooch laughed a little like he thought I was lying. "I mean it. I wouldn't kid around about something like that. They'll not only stick them in the toilet, Pooch, they'll flush the goddam things down, too, if they can." Bill looked like he was sort of impressed, so I figured I'd better stretch things a little. You didn't get a chance to impress an idiot like him every day in the week. "And there's another thing we can do," I said, "and that's go to the gym. You know what happens then? Well, I'll tell you. They take off all your clothes, drag you under the showers till you're scalded half to death. So there's another place we can go. That's the swimming pool." At that point I laughed to show them what a stupid thing that would be to do. Herby laughed right along with me which spoiled the effect I wanted. But you

couldn't blame Herby for laughing, even though what he was laughing about was getting scalded to death. Herby was just a good-natured kid, that's all.

"So what happens when we go to the swimming pool? Well, you'll never believe this." And after Bill agreed with me, which I ignored, I went on and told them. "What they do is strip you, tie heavy weights to your legs and heave you into the pool. And if you don't believe me ask my brother. He saw that happen to two or three guys."

"Sure," Deacon said. "Ask your brother. Ha ha ha. Very funny, doctor. I'll just run over to Okinawa right this minute and ask Paul if his little brother is as big a liar as I know he is."

It really pained me how hard the other guys laughed at Deacon's feeble attempt to be humorous.

"Well, you can write him a letter," I said, "if you can find somebody to write it for you."

That got a laugh too, which made us just about even. And I didn't join in to help my joke along like Deacon did.

Right then a cold blast of air hit us. The day was very cold for only the middle of September. And the air felt like evaporated hot ice.

"God, I'm cold," I said.

"Don't change the subject," Deacon said.

As soon as I said it was cold I noticed that Bill unzipped his jacket.

"Now listen," Pooch said in that low, soft voice of his. "What you say can't be true, Owen. They couldn't let guys drown like that. Why hell, man, that's murder!"

"Oh," I said, "they don't let them drown or anything stupid like that. They let them stay down at the bottom for a minute or so. To get a little wet, is all. Then they dive in and drag them out." I noticed that Bill was smiling. I wasn't impressing him any more. "Anyway," I said, "if you ask me, we should stay one hell of a long ways away from the pool."

Right then Bill said how sick he was of standing in one spot all the time. That guy bitches more than the Fleming baseball team,

and they haven't climbed out of the cellar since before I was born. "Come on," he said. "Let's go down to Krueger's for a sundae." I knew what his trouble was—he was just as cold as the rest of us, but he didn't want to admit it. About a minute later he started shadow boxing with the long shadow he threw against the side of Balder's grocery store.

We watched him for a while and then Pooch said,

"Let's take off. I'm freezing."

"Good form, Bill," I said.

"You look mighty fierce, Bill," Herby said.

Bill didn't say anything.

We walked down the street and piled into Krueger's, and Paula Gionfriddo was waiting on tables. The place was nearly empty. It was a cheesy place, but a hangout for kids in junior high school, so after three years the place didn't seem quite so cheesy any more. The store was always crawling with flies and things because nothing got cleaned very often, and you got the bitterest smells going from the backroom where old man Krueger mixed drugs.

Paula came over to wait on us and we all ordered lemon sundaes. Paula was a tall girl, a little taller than Herby who was five-six, and she'd quit school in the ninth grade to go to work for Krueger, who was a good friend of her dad's. Her mother and dad cracked up in an automobile wreck when she was a kid, and her father had been a barber I think. You heard a lot of guys saying she was easy stuff, and she'd got a reputation around school as being the town punch board, and Fleming's number one Prone Joan. Sometimes she gave that impression too, when she talked like a truck driver. Plus the fact that she had a sort of horsy face, with big buckteeth that were pretty crooked. But I didn't believe any of that stuff about her, because my brother Paul had gone through junior high with her, and he said she was a very religious Catholic. I was kind of crazy about her, but I didn't quite know why.

After we finished the sundaes and paid Paula, we decided to split up and make it home. We didn't have to report to the rat-race until the next morning. A rat-race is when you report to school on the first day and run around acting like you want certain teachers

more than others, which is a real crock. Nobody really wants any teachers or classes is the way I see it, but once you're competing against somebody else, even for something you don't want, you get very greedy about it.

Bill and Deacon decided they'd head downtown and see a movie, and seeing that Herby lived way over on the south side, me and Pooch took off together. We walked up the long hill and past rows and rows of black tar shacks where the factory workers live, and through a weedy field that took us over to the north side of town without cutting through the business district, and we walked along the best streets in town lined with elms and weeping willows until we almost reached the Red Cedar River where we made the turn off that took us into the Heatherwood section where we lived.

Our part of town is very weird and there's no other place in Fleming like it. Some people in our town live in large mansions, behind those elms and weeping willows, and a few more live in those crummy black tar shacks, and most everybody lives in the center of town in pretty average houses that could use a paint job. But mine and Pooch's family live in a part of town that seems like the country because a lot of land surrounds our homes, and our homes are very big but sort of falling apart at the seams, if you ask me. We live where the very rich people lived before Fleming got too crowded for their comfort. It's the sort of place somebody lives in because they don't have quite enough money to live out of town in style, and they're too proud to settle for the center of town. We have a nice hilly lawn around our house, though, and a big woods back a few city blocks where you can hunt pheasant in season.

We stopped in front of my house.

"So long," I said to Pooch. "Take her slow Joe."

"Yeah, play her crazy Daisy."

"I guess I'll hit the rack Jack."

"Well," he said, "don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"God," I said, "that sounds very dreary."

"See you tomorrow," Pooch said.

"So long, Tom," I said. "Stop around for me in the morning."

And Pooch took off for his house which is about a block down from ours. We always say something corny like that when we leave each other. We always have, too. I don't know why. Anyway, he's one in a million, and I always feel bad when I think about how nobody ever lets his family forget that his father was a thief. He was a thief who wasn't very successful. He got caught. Back in the twenties he was a banker in Fleming, and just after the depression began—when us guys were born—he embezzled fifty thousand dollars from the bank he worked in. He got caught and put in prison. And when he got out in the late thirties he went into a firm, importing fruit from Argentina. Nobody exactly knows where the money came from that got him on his feet again, but my father figures he had a smart lawyer. And listen, you should hear the way people in this town talk about him. Jabber jabber jabber, all the time. It's really disgusting. My old man doesn't happen to like Mr. Miller very much either. But I think he's a pretty good guy myself; he always takes Pooch hunting and fishing whenever he goes.

Anyway I stood there in front of my house and watched Pooch walk home. The more I thought about his father being a thief, the less bad it seemed to me. After all, my old man drinks like a *fish*, and that's very bad even though he doesn't get arrested for it all the time.

I began to feel very cold. As soon as Pooch walked into his house, I walked into mine.

2

My mother woke me at seven o'clock the next morning and it was just about all I could do to lift my eyelids. She kept yelling "Get up" and I kept yelling "I'm up," and pretty soon I was having that old, wonderful dream again. It's a very weird dream. I never have it until the weather starts getting cold and it goes this way. I get out of bed, warm as toast, and about three seconds later I'm dressed, I've already washed my face and brushed my teeth, eaten breakfast, gone to school, and if the dream's a very great one sometimes the whole lousy day of school is over. And then my mother starts yelling again and I can feel the cold sheets and I

know that I haven't even got out of bed yet. I still have to go through putting my bare feet on the icy floor.

"Owen, are you out of bed yet?"

Now isn't that some question. She knows I'm not up. She knows me well enough by now to know that I don't get up by the numbers. Someday I'm going to tell her the truth and see what happens then. That should be a riot.

"Sure I'm up," I said, sticking my head out from under the covers. "Coming right down."

"It's nearly eight o'clock now. You'd better not be late your first day."

I was into a pair of pants and a T shirt in nothing flat, and to save time I only brushed my teeth on the outside. I dashed a few drops of cold water on my face, and didn't even look in the mirror. I didn't use any soap because my nose is very sensitive to things like that in the morning, and besides I always wash before I go to bed. Then I ran down the stairs three at a time, and tried to tell myself not to show her how P Od I was about her getting my breakfast. She wasn't in very good health, and she wouldn't hire a cook. We used to have cooks all the time, but then when she began getting sick a lot she wouldn't let anybody else do anything.

She had a letter from my brother Paul who's in Okinawa, and she started reading it to me. She's very strange about his letters. She seems to think that either I can't read yet or else she's got the greatest voice going, because she won't let me read the letters to myself. They can be very thick, but when she reads them they last for about one measly paragraph. I guess she thinks I was born yesterday. How she expects me to believe that a five-page letter takes thirty seconds to read is beyond me. Sometimes you'd almost get the idea that Paul was writing her love letters.

Anyway, while I fiddled around with a piece of toast, she read me part of the letter:

"Things are drabber than usual here. The question of the day seems to be the 1st three-graders mess. There is a strong movement afoot to use some of the flunky privates for waiters so we won't have to soil ourselves standing in line with the common rabble—I'm against this on moral

grounds, but I'm afraid the Regular Army men will carry the day, as they always do. I'll take a severe wiggling from the men in my section, but then that's the risk one assumes when called to positions of trust and responsibility. Noblesse oblige, you know."

Mom put that page on the table, face down, and riffled through the letter for another paragraph. You know, you're always hearing about censoring letters from overseas and all that, but that's nothing to the censoring that goes on in our house. For all I know from what my mother reads me, Paul's spending the whole war out at the Fleming Country Club.

"What's that oblige thing he mentions, Mom?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly. It has to do with the duties of rank, I think, or high birth. We'll ask your father when he comes home this evening."

"We could look in a dictionary," I said.

"It's not that important. You have to leave for school in a moment anyway."

"What a gruesome thought," I said.

She ignored me, and started reading again.

"Will you tell Owen he owes me two letters? Get through to him that I'm not writing for my health. It would take him ten minutes to compose an opus that would let me know what the hell he's doing with himself—new loves, etc. If I don't hear from him within the next month, I'll have to assume that he's either stupid or unfeeling or both. And if I return to find that he's neither, I'll be forced to bash his teeth down his throat. . . . Am I penetrating, Owen?"

He penetrated all right, and I got a look from my mother that sort of penetrated, too. Before she had a chance to say anything I told her I'd drop him a line during the week. I gave up on the toast and took a spoonful of oatmeal and gave up on that, too. I wanted a cigarette like crazy, but I didn't have one and even if I did I wouldn't dare smoke it in front of her. She would start telling me how young I am and how it would stunt my growth. She didn't seem to realize that I was almost six feet tall, and not even sixteen yet.

There was one hell of a loud racket at the front door right then.

"Will you tell Thomas Miller," my mother said, "to be quieter mornings? You know how your father's temper is when he's disturbed too early."

"It's no worse than mine, I'll bet."

I got up from the chair and started for the kitchen door.

"Owen, I have something very important to ask you."

"Mom, I'm late for school. I'm holding up Pooch."

She walked over to me and her long house dress hung down to her floppy bedroom slippers that were made of llama's wool or something. Very expensive and old—like our house and our car and everything else we owned. My mother had one hand pressed to the small of her back. She had a bad back and a lousy stomach. She'd had a couple of operations for tumors and was always getting growths in different places. Doc Goody thinks the pains in her stomach and back are connected somehow, but he doesn't know quite how. My old man thinks she should go to a specialist, but Doc Goody delivered me and Paul and that's enough for my mother. She seems to think he's the last word in medicine. Personally I'm afraid of the guy myself. His hands shake all the time and he looks about a hundred years old. I wouldn't let the old guy come near me with a ten-foot pole, and that's no joke. Besides, when he yanked out my tonsils a few years back he left tags scattered all over my throat.

She put her arm around my waist.

"I want you to try harder now that you're in high school."

"Okay," I said, "I'll try harder."

"It would certainly make your father awfully happy to see you make the honor roll for a change. Paul was nearly always an honor student."

"Sure he was, Mom. But Paul was very brainy. It was a cinch for him to make it. It was almost disgusting the way he made it all the time. He might've been a little more popular if he'd taken it easy."

"Popularity," she said. "Popularity! That's an old excuse of

yours, Owen, and it's wearing terribly thin. My goodness! You and Paul are brothers. You can't be so very different."

"It's not that we're so different," I said. "It's the teachers who're different. They're not as young as they used to be. They're getting old and cranky."

Pooch began banging the door down again.

"I'd better go, Mom, before Pooch wakes up dad."

"Before you go, will you promise me you'll try and do better?"

"Yes, I promise. I told you that already. I've told you seventy-five thousand times."

I grabbed my pencil and notebook from the telephone stand in the dining room.

"Owen, sometimes I don't think you have your heart in anything."

"Yes, I do. I enjoy things an awful lot, Mom. Maybe the wrong things, but I do enjoy them."

"What things, Owen?"

"I'm late, can't you see that? D'you want me and Pooch to be late? I'll draw you a diagram sometime."

"Watch your tongue, please, young man. That's another big part of your trouble."

"All right," I said, "I'll tell you what I don't enjoy. I don't like you getting my breakfast just because you won't keep a maid. And I wish you'd stop——"

"By the way," she said. "While we're on your behavior, are you smoking?"

She got out of answering my question by asking another one. Very clever.

"No, I'm not smoking," I said. "I couldn't even if I wanted to. They're rationed—you know that."

"You're absolutely sure you're not smoking?"

"I gave up the beastly habit, Mom. I only chew them now."

She tried not to smile but she did.

"You'd better hurry to school now," she said. "And try for me to be a good boy."

"I'll try," I said, "but it'll be a strain." And I took off before she could get in the last word edgewise. She's a champion at that.

"Come on," I said to Pooch, "the screws are waiting for us. We're inmates for three more years. Just a new goddam prison, that's the only difference."

"You know it," Pooch said. "Terrific football team at Cornell, though. It's the best in the state."

"Are you going out?"

"Sure," he said. "I should make first-string little Reds this year. And next year I'll be a big Red."

Pooch isn't just slinging it either. He'll make the team if it breaks his neck, and if he doesn't make the team his old man'll break his neck. His father lives for sports and stuff like that. He played pro football for a few years after he got out of college, and he played on the same team with Jim Thorpe for a while. The only thing my old man ever played was golf, but I don't care. I'm not exactly mad about sports.

"Crazy legs Bill—he'll go out too," I said. "Two bits he makes it."

"Very big deal," Pooch said.

"I second that."

We stopped at the vacant lot across the street from Cornell and had ourselves a quick smoke. Pooch was well supplied—he had two butts and toothpicks on him. We used the toothpicks so we could smoke all the way down to the ash, and my lip almost caught on fire.

"For crissake, Pooch, isn't there any tobacco in these? You might as well smoke corn silk."

I sat there coughing and clearing my throat, and I noticed that Pooch didn't look any too healthy himself. His face was grayish-white.

"They aren't too good, are they? In fact they're crummy." He threw his away, and we both sat there sort of dizzy for a minute. "They're made out of too many things, that's the trouble. Dad didn't leave enough pipe tobacco in the ash trays, so I had to take

apart a cigar stub and throw that stuff in. And there's one or two Pall Mall stubs of my mother's in there, too."

"What a gruesome combination," I said. My stomach was twisting and turning. "Goddam, Pooch, I'm dying! You didn't poison me on purpose, did you?"

"Yes, by gads, I did!"

"Why?"

"So I could capture your daughter and steal your castle, Sir Frothingforth."

"Why Reynoldswig, you young cad!" I pulled a handkerchief out of my pocket and stuck it up my sleeve like those French fops do in the movies. "By gads, sir, you'll never marry my daughter."

"I'll throw you in the bloody moat and drown you, Sir Frothingforth, sir."

"Over my dead body."

"Exactly my bloody plan, old boy."

We both lay back on the cold dirt and weeds and started rolling all around and started splitting our guts with laughter. My sides were hurting I laughed so hard, and neither of us knew what was funny but neither of us could quit laughing. We had a real laughing streak going. I didn't know which was worse, being sick to my stomach or throwing a few dozen ribs out of joint like that. Pooch sure was a strange-sounding Englishman. Pretty soon we quieted down to a dull roar.

"Call a hearse for me, will you?" I said. "I just passed away." I closed my eyes and lay there not even shivering I was so relaxed.

"Come on," Pooch said a little hoarsely, "we'll be late in about one second." He started trotting toward the street. He let me catch up with him; then we raced to the school steps and he ran circles around me. Of course I don't pretend to be any kind of an athlete—I was born out of condition.

And there she stood. Cornell High School, or corn-ball high school, staring us straight in the face. It wasn't much to look at, but it was awful. It was made of old, wine-colored brick, and it looked moldy around the edges. Whoever built it must have got a very raw deal from Fleming and was out to give the place a bad name. It

looked more like the arc welding factory out in North Fleming than anything else I can think of.

I guess I should give the big word on the guy who donated the money for this dump. His name was Ezra Cornell, and he also gave the money for that college out in the East. Well, he happens to be my great-great uncle, so as long as he's one of the family I feel it's okay to give the scoop on him. He was a lumber baron when Michigan was all wild territory, and he cut down the virgin timber and made millions of dollars. He also sold faulty muskets to the North and the South during the Civil War, but I guess that was only a side line of his. He must have been a very shrewd number to get away with all he did. My mother's an amateur genealogist, and she never lets any of us forget where we came from. She discovered that King Richard the Lion Hearted and his bad brother John are my ancestors, too. On my old man's side. Now isn't that really a deal? All I've got to say is, the royal family sure as hell went to pot with a loud crash. I mean my old man owns a big bookstore and, until the Democrats lost out in Michigan, he was publisher of all state documents and books on Michigan history, but that's sure a long ways from being a lumber baron or a king. Naturally I'd never tell my mother that, though, seeing how much pride she takes in that sort of stuff.

"Boy, what a dump," Pooch said.

We walked into the hall by the principal's office.

"Say Pooch—I want to ask you a question. D'you know if this genealogy stuff is really on the level?"

"You got me," he said. He shrugged his shoulders. "What's genealogy, anyway?"

"Nothing," I said. "It isn't anything really. It's just one big crock I guess."

We met Herby and Bill right inside the door, and they said they hadn't run across Deacon anywhere.

"I hope he's not chickening out today," Bill said. He flipped a coin up in the air, just like George Raft does in those corny gangster movies. "We'll need him."

"Deacon's not chicken," Pooch told Bill.

"No, he's goose," Herby said. "He's goose because he's always goosing somebody." Herby laughed very hard.

"What do we need Deacon for anyway?" I said. "You talk like there'll be a war or something."

Bill had that very significant look in his eyes. He smiled like he knew something that I didn't know, which was a fat chance. "Wait and see," he said. "I'm not gonna say anything more. You just wait and see, Harding."

After I told him he made me sick we walked into the principal's office to see who the hell we were supposed to report to. There was a big list of names tacked up on the bulletin board, and we found our names on it in alphabetical order. Homeroom 104—Adams through Gillion. Homeroom 337—Harding through Moorhouse. And Homeroom 300—Navaretta through Young. And so Bill and Deacon would be together and so would me and Pooch, but Herby, whose last name was Tubbs, would be all alone in Room 300.

Herby looked very sad—maybe even sadder because he was so chubby.

"Says on here we should be in class at nine," Pooch said. "We'd better step on it."

"Damn it," Herby said, "why is my name Tubbs anyway?" Boy, he looked sad. "Maybe I can change it. At least for this semester. D'you think they'd let me, Owen? Gosh, I don't want to be alone."

"Oh, take it easy," said Bill. "Forget about it. That's the way the ball bounces, boy." He gave Herby a stupid slap on the back that was meant to be manly or something.

"Bill," I said, "you give me one royal pain in the ass. Can't you see he feels bad?"

"I'm okay," Herby said, smiling; "never felt better." It wasn't much of a smile but it was better than nothing. "Come on, you guys, let's get upstairs."

So we left Bill by the office and walked up to the third floor, and started down the hall to dump Herby off at Room 300, and right then we saw this bunch of big guys coming toward us. All of them looked like first-string big Reds, and if they weren't six and a

half feet tall they weren't much shorter. Without waiting around to investigate, I took off around the corner and ran down the hall until I spotted a can. I opened the door and there must have been twenty guys inside, and they were just as hefty as everybody else I'd seen around the stupid school. I took one damn fast look around, and then without waiting to excuse myself I shot out of there like a bat out of hell.

It's not that I'm a coward or anything, but I'm the next thing to it. If the odds are against me I don't see any sense in waiting around to see if they're going to even out or not. That's stupid. The way I see it—better a healthy coward than a mangled moron.

I ran back to where I'd left Herby and Pooch and they weren't there any more. I hoped there wasn't really any truth to that stuff about the pool, because Herby would sink like a rock. Somebody opened a door right then and I started tearing down the hall.

While I was running the last bell rang, and I kept running and climbed into Room 337 just as the homeroom teacher was closing the door. He gave me a screwy stare, and I had a hunch it wouldn't be long before he'd wish he'd never seen me. He told me to take a seat, and then he'd read off the roll to see if he could pronounce our names right. I took a seat in the back of the room so I wouldn't be too conspicuous right away. I didn't see any sense in making myself known any sooner than I had to.

Our homeroom teacher looked very young to be a teacher, and he was wearing a very sharp single-breasted suit. He was grinning stupidly, and I wondered if that was because he was nervous. If he wasn't nervous that was only because he didn't know what a bunch of idiots he was going to have for the next three years. He said his name was Joel Dean Harris, and that he taught Political Economics, and that when we got in the twelfth grade we'd have him for a teacher. Big deal. He'd just graduated from Harvard last year, and we were his first class, he said. He sure seemed very anxious to be buddy-buddy.

"We'll get along wonderfully once we know one another," he said. "I'm sure of it. Now I have one favor to ask of you. Please don't disturb Miss Reynolds next door. I hear that's absolute

sacrilege.” He paused and gave us a big grin. I wondered how many drippy girls would want to stay after school and correct papers for him—probably millions. He didn’t do much to me, though. “I happen to know,” he went on, “that she’s been teaching here for thirty-eight years. I think we have to bow before such a record. At least I suggest that we keep our socializing down to a minimum.”

He sure didn’t sound like any teacher I’d ever had. I wondered how long he’d last. He’d already smiled enough in ten minutes to last most teachers a whole semester. I did have an English teacher in the seventh grade, though, who used to smile all the time. But she used to keep buttoning and unbuttoning her dress too, so I figured out that the smile was just a nervous spasm. She looked a hundred and five years old and with that grin on her face she really gave me the creeps. She was the only teacher I ever knew who would pull your hair with a grin on her face all the time she was doing it.

Mr. Harris began reading off the roll and just about when he got to the end the door opened, and in walked Pooch looking like he’d really had it.

“Who are you?” Mr. Harris asked him. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing much,” Pooch said.

Boy, did he look like the end. All the hair down the middle of his head was shaved off, and he was wearing black mascara on his cheeks and lipstick on his forehead. His pants were rolled up to his knees and he was drenched from head to toe. The class got a large charge out of it.

“Who did this to you?”

“Oh, nobody did it,” Pooch said. “I mean nobody I know did it.” He rolled down his pants.

“Did you recognize any of them?” Mr. Harris asked.

“I guess they were seniors.”

“Do you know any of their names?”

“They were seniors,” Pooch said. “I didn’t know any of them. I don’t know any seniors.”

Whenever Mr. Harris wasn’t looking I kept waving very franti-

cally at Pooch, but he didn't notice. Once I thought Mr. Harris saw me, so I pretended I was making a grab for a fly. I wanted to find out about Herby.

"Now listen, you must know some of them. At least you could point them out to me, couldn't you?"

"I doubt it," Pooch said. "I didn't have much time to look. They all looked alike to me."

"This whole thing strikes me as incredible," Mr. Harris said. He was beginning to look sort of P Od, and the whole class was waiting for something to happen. Finally Mr. Harris sat down at his desk and asked Pooch his name, and then began writing something on a slip of paper. I cleared my throat as loud as I could until Pooch noticed me, and then I ran through a lot of wild signals to find out what happened to Herby. Right in the middle of one big gesture Mr. Harris looked up and saw me. I tried to act like I was yawning or throwing a mild fit, but he was wise to me.

"What's your name?" he said.

"D'you mean me?" I said, like there was no reason in the world he should mean me. I even looked at the dope sitting next to me like he might mean him.

"I mean you," he said. "You!"

"My name is Owen Harding. Harrison is my middle name." For some stupid reason everybody in the room thought that was funny as all hell and started laughing. I thought it was pretty lacking in wit myself.

"Why were you waving your arms around?"

"I was just trying to tell him he ought to take a seat," I said, pointing at Pooch.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"No. I hardly ever saw him before."

"Well, do you think it's up to you to tell my pupils what to do?"

"No, I guess it isn't."

"Why did you do it then?" asked Mr. Harris.

"Well," I said, "I just thought I'd be polite."

That seemed to fix his box. He gave me a long, weird look and then began beating his gums with Pooch. There were two rows of

girls in the front of the room who looked older than tenth graders. One of them was looking at me and I stared beyond her like she didn't exist. When I looked at her again she was still looking at me and I noticed how pretty she was. She looked more like Claudette Colbert than Claudette Colbert does. She was wearing a blue angora sweater that was a very tight fit, and she sure didn't look like any tenth grader to me. And her hair was long and brown and straight and fell down over her shoulders. She kept looking at me for some stupid reason so I tried to scowl, but I don't know how well I pulled it off. Finally I looked away like she didn't exist.

I sure had a couple of dunces sitting on both sides of me. They were both from Patterson, which is the other junior high school in Fleming. One guy kept picking his nose and rubbing it under his chair seat, and then he'd look around to see if anybody was watching him. I was watching him and I let him know it. Nose pickers give me a royal pain. The other guy on my right was carving his initials in his desk like he was planning to stay a while, and by the looks of him I figured he would stay a while. Patterson Junior High is strictly for the birds, and I know because what it turned out sat on both sides of me.

Mr. Harris handed Pooch a slip and then he said, "This is good till tomorrow morning. Remember now. Tomorrow morning and not later. If you're late both of us might be on the carpet." And then he smiled at Pooch. Maybe he wasn't a bad guy after all. Pooch stuffed the slip in his watch pocket and took off without looking at me.

"Lanier——" Mr. Harris said, reading the rest of the names off the roll. "Manson. Miller—he's gone home. Mirowsky and Moorhouse. There, that's all of you." And then he asked us if he'd pronounced all our names right. Nobody said anything but he didn't get Al's name right. The o in Mirowsky is supposed to sound like an ah instead of an o, but Al's too shy to say anything. Al's so shy that he can go all semester without the teacher knowing his name, and somehow he manages to get a C in everything. That's because he never shoots off his mouth and says something stupid, so the teachers think he's brilliant all the time. Teachers can be the

biggest dopes going. Actually Al's one of the stupidest guys I've ever known in my life. But he's very nice. He cheats like mad and he always gets away with it. I suppose when you get right down to it Al isn't really as dumb as he puts on. He's never failed anything and I've failed Algebra twice.

Well, it finally looked like we might get under way with this moronic rat-race. Mr. Harris said that some honor students who were seniors had been invited into our homeroom today, and they would take us around school and sign us up in our classes, and then show us any sights we might be interested in seeing. He pointed at the girls in the first two rows. A fat chance any honor girl could show me any sights I'd want to see either in or out of school.

Being Harding and the first name on his roster, he called me to the front of the room. And then this girl who'd been staring at me got up and said she'd take me around. This would have been a break for Bill who loves to snow the girls, but I wasn't exactly knocked out about spending all day with this girl. I'd have to eat with her at noon in the cafeteria and I'd probably end up paying for her. Every time you take out a girl you find yourself broke before you know which end is up. The last time I had a date I ran through two bucks in no time flat. And she didn't even let me kiss her good night afterwards.

We walked out into the hall.

"Hello, my name's Barbara," this girl said, smiling.

"I guess you know mine," I said. I smiled back.

As I walked down the hall with her I thought of something that made me feel better. Seeing that I was stuck with her all day maybe these seniors would take me for a senior too. That was an idea that made me feel pretty good.

I looked at her out of the corner of my eye, and started whistling.

3

We walked down to the end of the hall without saying anything. I got a drink of water from the fountain and then held the knob while she took a drink. That seemed to loosen her up a little.

"My full name's Barbara Alslinger," she said, and she held out her hand. I looked at it. Then I guessed she wanted me to shake it

so I shook it. That was the first time in my life I'd ever shaken hands with a girl.

"My name's Herbert Tubbs," I said.

"I know your name," she said, laughing. "Owen Harris Harding."

"Harrison," I said. "But keep it a secret."

"That's a nice, euphonic middle name." She stared at me. "You were very funny in class."

"I guess I'm famous already," I said. "That guy who looked all mangled was a friend of mine, Pooch Miller. He was really a mess, wasn't he?"

"Awful."

"He's a very nice guy, though," I said. "He's my best friend."

"Is he?" she said.

"He is," I said.

We started down the stairs to the second floor and I looked at her and she was staring straight ahead. Her eyes were the brownest and brightest I'd ever seen. Her eyes were better than anything else about her, and they almost made her look beautiful all by themselves. Maybe they couldn't melt a heart of stone but I didn't have any heart of stone. We passed a can and I stopped, and after she walked on a few steps she turned around.

"Listen," I said. "Excuse me for a second, will you?" I pointed at the can. "I'll only be a second."

She blushed a little and said she'd be waiting right outside for me.

"I'll be with you in a flash," I said, and vanished into the can.

I had to rush like crazy to do all I wanted to do. I yanked off my shirt and T shirt, grabbed some paper towels and laid them on the ledge below the mirror, and took some soap powder from the glass container. Then I washed my face and chest and under my arms, and after I managed to get my pants all wet when I tried to wipe the soap off me, I wet my hair and combed it. After I got all dry I took some toilet paper and got into my ears and the stupid wax came out by the bucketful. When I was all set to go out in the hall again, I took a long look at myself in the mirror, and I wondered

why I'd gone to all the trouble. My face is cheesy. It's not that I'm ugly, but for one thing I've got pimples all over my forehead. They just seem to run wild. Two months ago they covered my chin and before that I had a few horrors on my neck. I wonder where they're planning on going next? I've got a few good ideas but I hope I'm wrong.

Barbara was waiting right where I'd left her and she didn't seem to notice any difference.

We started walking down the hall together.

The hall was crowded and kids kept bumping into us.

"Boy, some crowd," I said.

"That's why they call it the rat-race," she said.

"By the way, Barb—d'you mind if I call you Barb?" She said she didn't mind. "Well, Barb, what does euphonic mean anyway?"

"It means that your middle name has a nice sound."

"That's good," I said. "Barbara's euphonic, too."

And we walked down to the first floor, where we'd begin the rat-race along with all the other rats.

Well, I guess I got stuck with the worst creeps and crackpots at Cornell, and Cornell must attract them from all over the world. The place is crawling with them. After Barb signed me up with Miss Thorndike for Geometry and with Mr. Davis for Biology, she dragged me into Room 100. That's Miss Fiske's room and she teaches Ancient History. She ought to be perfect for that subject, she's just about as ancient as they come. Paul had her five years ago, and he says she's got a racket in the summer by taking very wealthy people over to Europe and introducing them to culture. After seeing the way she dresses you'd think that somebody would tell her that culture begins at home. She's a wreck. In fact she's worse than that. I'll bet she hasn't combed her hair since the old power plant blew up out on South Street, and that was many years ago. It wouldn't do her any harm to hit a shower once every month or so either.

"I'll bet I flunk her flat," I told Barb as we walked up the stairs. "She's kind of gruesome, isn't she?"

"She's all right. You can bluff like mad in her class—at least that's what I've been told."

"She sure wouldn't win any beauty contest," I said. "She's really had it."

"Well," said Barb, "you teach a million dense boys for thirty years and see how sane you are. It's not the keenest way to make a living."

She had a point there but I didn't know why she sounded so P Od. I looked at her. She looked very P Od.

"You planning on teaching or something?"

"Perhaps I will. I've thought about it."

"Well, give it plenty of thought," I said. "Just look around you. You might end up a raving maniac like most of them do. Most of them do, you know. D'you happen to know that women teachers can't get married?"

She said she knew all about it, and that maybe that was a good reason to teach. Her voice was very chilly. I guess I rubbed her the wrong way. I swore up and down at Mr. Harris for sticking me with an honor student girl. They all get so goddam touchy over nothing at all. They study too hard, I guess. I whistled "The Trolley Song" very cheerfully to let her know I didn't care whether I rubbed her the wrong way or not. God, I was mad!

Miss Reynolds was the next old girl I had to sign up with. She was the English teacher Mr. Harris said complained about noise all the time. Did I have news for *him*.

She looked at my records; then she squinted at me through an eyeglass that was tied onto the end of a long black ribbon. I felt kind of creepy under her gaze.

"Why, Harding," she yelled, "Harding!" She looked at me like I was a blackboard that needed erasing.

"That's me," I said.

"Not *Paul* Harding again. Paul, you're not back with me again, are you? No—of course, that's impossible." She squinted at my records again, but I wouldn't swear to God that she could see anything beyond the eyeglass.

"No, I'm not Paul. I'm Paul's younger brother, Owen. Paul's been in the service for over a year."

"You say Paul's running a service station? Mercy, I expected much more of him! It's difficult to believe. Difficult to believe indeed! And he was such a clever boy."

"Miss Reynolds, he's in the service now. Paul's gone in the service."

"Speak up there, boy. Don't mumble. You never get anywhere mumbling. Now, to whom am I speaking?"

I looked at Barb and Barb was looking at me and we both looked at Miss Reynolds, and the whole deal sure was screwy.

"I'm Owen Harrison Harding," I shouted until I nearly blew my stack. "It's written out on the report there on your desk."

"Well, you needn't shout so loudly, young man. Why didn't you speak up immediately?" Then she squinted at the report again and said, "Yes, you're right. It is here. So it is."

Then she started fiddling around with the buttons on her dress like a lot of old teachers do. Sometimes you get very worried that they might do a strip right in class without knowing it. It's awful. You want to run up to the front of the room and stop them before they go too far. Sometimes they get carried away reading Shakespeare out loud and playing all the parts, and that's when they start undressing themselves. It's really sad to see people get old and queer like that. You feel like laughing, but sometimes you feel like you could cry. At least I do sometimes.

The last class I signed up with was Band and that's the only class I wanted, except maybe for English. I play a sousaphone, which is one of those big bass horns that winds around your neck, and got named after John Philip Sousa. Mr. Chambers seemed like a nice guy; he shook hands with me and asked how Paul was. Paul was very good friends with Mr. Chambers' son Don, and Don was about the creepiest character going. He used to smoke two cigarettes at once, and when he was a kid he used to ram his head against the birdbath in back of Deacon's house. He would ram the hell out of his head like a goat. He was a great oboe player in school, and when I was a kid I used to think that oboes ate away at your

brain and drove you crazy. Once Paul bet Don a dollar he couldn't eat a whole bar of soap and the dumb bastard did it, and he was so creepy he didn't even get sick. He's a pilot in the Air Corps now, and he's married to one of Herby's cousins. Herby's practically famous for having so many cousins. Anyway, I was glad to sign up with the band.

After me and Barb finished screwing around with my stupid schedule, we went down to the cafeteria for lunch. It was a very large cafeteria with stainless steel all over the place, but the food was complete pure crud. The soup was warmed-up dishwater, and the peas tasted like cauliflower, and so did the cauliflower, and the lousy meat looked so rancid it should have jumped off my plate and waltzed away. The only thing I could stand was the milk because it tasted like milk, which surprised the hell out of me because I thought sure it would taste like cauliflower. After we finished the rotten meal, Barb paid for her own slop and I thought that was very nice of her. I don't know many girls who'd ever pay for anything if they could find a way around it. But when I tried to pay the girl at the cash register for both of us, Barb told me to keep my money. And I didn't get phony and insist on paying for her either, because I guess miracles like that only happen once or twice.

As we were leaving I saw Deacon and Herby putting their trays down on a table over by the window, and I asked Barb to wait for me a second. She looked at me with those brown eyes of hers. I couldn't help staring at them all the time.

"We're through anyhow," she said. She looked at her watch and her long hair fell across her cheeks. "At one o'clock you should report to your homeroom, and Mr. Harris will tell you what to do. You may get the rest of the day off."

I thought about that.

"Look, if there's any chance I won't get the rest of the day off, why don't I just take off without asking him?"

"Don't be funny," she said very seriously. "You've got ten minutes, freshman." And then, before I had a chance to think up something sharp to say, she walked out of the cafeteria, her hips

swaying just a little like a boy's do. What a goof, I thought, as I walked over to shoot the breeze with Deacon and Herby.

Neither of them had got shafted by the seniors, and I told them all about what happened to Pooch. Herby felt sorry about it but he couldn't help getting a big charge out of it, and Deacon, who's getting to be more like Bill every day, didn't even seem to hear me—he just sat there pouting. The one talent Deacon has more than anybody else living or dead is pouting. He didn't used to be that way, but the older he gets, the more stuck on himself he is. It can get on your nerves. He's very short and he's sensitive about it, and when we were about ten he used to pretend he was Napoleon all the time, and to try and get us guys to be England or Germany so he could mow us down. I remember once his cousin, Slim, told him about Waterloo, and he bawled his head off. Herby always makes him feel important by telling him he looks like Alan Ladd, and everybody knows that Alan Ladd's only about five foot three. Herby is a very nice guy. Actually Deacon doesn't look any more like Alan Ladd than Herby does.

I sat down with them and Herby gave me one of his peanut butter and jam sandwiches. Herby always brings his lunch to school. His folks don't have very much money.

"Boy, did my father really make me sore this morning," Deacon said. "I was so sore I left the house without speaking to him."

"You probably broke his heart," I said. Herby had a haunted look on his round face like he'd already heard the whole story. So while Deacon bitched and moaned all over the place, Herby mimicked the way he talked and kept waving his arms. Herby could be pretty funny sometimes.

"He took the car this morning," Deacon said. "I told him I needed it but oh, no, he wouldn't listen. Not him. He had some crummy excuse about having to go to the bank this noon. That really gripes me, O.H. He said he bought the heap for me, not him!"

Herby began humming "Hearts and Flowers," and pretended he was playing a violin.

"Listen, Doctor," Deacon said to Herby, "d'you think you could bring yourself to shut your goddam mouth for two seconds?"

Herby just sat there smiling at him.

"Anyway," Deacon said, "I think that's a filthy trick he pulled. He promised the heap to me."

"I'll say a prayer for you tonight, Deacon."

"Sometimes you make me sick," Deacon said.

"I agree with you, no kidding. Somebody should lynch your old man. I feel for you all the way, boy—just give me a little more time to reach you."

"We could've driven around after school! Now we have to walk like everybody else!"

I ought to say one more thing about Deacon. He's well on his way to becoming a small-time criminal. When he takes us guys out for a spin, his mother gives him the ration book and a couple of bucks for gas. So Deacon, a real shrewdy from way back, always gives us a song and dance about not having any money. So we end up paying for the gas and he comes out two bucks richer. Some friend. Not only that, whenever he comes over to my house he eats up all my old man's maraschino cherries. It's not that that's such a bad crime; it's the way he creeps into the kitchen and does it like he's housebreaking. I don't care if he eats up all the cherries in the house, but at least he could ask for them. Deacon's the sort of guy you're always trying to get to ask for things, but he never seems to want anything he has to ask for. I wouldn't even mention the cherries except my old man throws a violent fit when somebody touches them. He uses them for drinks, and he sure must use one hell of a lot of them because he drinks like a fish.

I went back to my homeroom at one o'clock, and we had to sit around twiddling our thumbs until school let out at half past three. Mr. Harris said he didn't have the authority to let us go early. He told us a couple of stories to pass the time away, and they were mildly funny. They're not funny enough to repeat, but they weren't bad coming from a teacher. I even laughed once.

After school Herby and Deacon and Bill said they were going downtown to play some Eight ball, so I took off for home alone.

I can't play at Farhat's joint any more because one night during the summer I lost my head and tore the felt on one of the pool tables all to hell. I remember I was playing fifty cents a game with Bill, and every time I wasn't looking he would push balls into the pockets. That made me feel bad. Then I caught him in the goddam act and made a wild jab at him with my cue stick and missed and ripped this hole about six inches long in the felt. I had to pay ten bucks, or my father did, for a patching job, and I told Bill I was planning on taking five of it out of his stupid hide. Well, we got in a fight and he beat me like a punching bag. He had on his school ring, though, and he didn't pass up any chances to use it on my face like a corkscrew. He was so happy about how easy he won that he ended up giving me five dollars. Now wasn't that a funny thing for him to do after cheating me like that? It sure isn't easy to read his mind, if he has any mind to read.

That night I went up the street to pick up Pooch for dinner. He eats and sleeps at my house a lot, and I do at his house too. Our families don't understand it, and they're always asking us if we haven't seen enough of each other in the daytime. Well, it's just that we enjoy being together, and it's nicer being together at night when it's dark and you're lying in bed and all that. We get the weirdest thoughts then, and we like to tell each other how we feel about things. We almost always feel the same about things. He likes the jokes I tell him and I like the way he laughs at them. And we're always talking about what we're going to do with our lives, and whatever it is, we're going to do it together. At least that's what we say.

I picked up Pooch and we stood out in the night for a while. It was a very nice night—the kind you'll always see around Fleming when summer's nearly over and the leaves begin to turn and there's the smell of burning leaves in the air. The sky was sparkling with stars, and there was a full moon, and there weren't any clouds in the sky. Me and Pooch think the moon looks like Charles Laughton's face or Bill's father's face when it's full. The weeping willows along our street were blowing and bowing sort of in the wind. The night was swell and made me think of how

when summer ends you have to go back to school and then pretty soon it's winter and you can't stay outside and enjoy just looking at things any more.

"It's cold out here," Pooch said.

"We'd better get home for dinner," I said.

"Boy, Slim really fixed my box today, Owen."

We started walking along.

"Did Slim do it? You'd think Bill and Deacon would've got it too."

"They were hiding, I guess. Slim was going to cut off all my hair while Sturdevant and Polk held me down, but old man Frazer came wheeling around the corner and they took off." Pooch laughed. He laughed like he always does, very quietly and like something was really funny. "I looked awful, didn't I?"

"Awful," I said. "How come you didn't tell Mr. Harris?"

"Hell, it was none of his business."

"You're right, it wasn't. He might've got Slim and those guys in trouble."

"That's what I thought," Pooch said.

"Mr. Harris seems like a nice guy, though. He gave you the day off."

"Oh, he's okay," said Pooch, "for a teacher."

We walked into my house and my old man was sitting in his easy chair by the fireplace, behind the Fleming *Daily World*. The smoke from his pipe was curling over the top of the paper, and when he heard us he threw the paper on the rug and leered at us over the top of his glasses.

"Why, how are you, Deacon?" he said. "You haven't been around in ages." He picked up a bottle half full of beer and skoaled it. "Years it seems like," he said.

"This is Pooch, Dad. Pooch. And you just saw him last night." It was sort of a routine by now that I would act like I didn't know he was kidding. I wondered if it bored him as much as it did me.

He leered at me over the top of his glasses. He likes to try and look spooky sometimes.

"I know it's Pooch. How's your father, laddy?"

"He's just fine," Pooch said. "Just great. He's feeling terrific."

"Well, with each adjective his health seems to improve," my father said. "I'm certainly happy for him."

Pooch looked puzzled.

We all stood around for a while without saying anything.

"Well now!" my old man shouted, and got out of his chair. "And how's the maternal side?"

"My mother?" Pooch said. "Oh, she's feeling—well she's all right I guess."

"Perhaps with sufficient rest she'll soon be feeling terrific too. Anyway, we can hope for the best."

My old man gets sarcastic sometimes.

He gave out with a gigantic yawn, and then knocked out his pipe ashes in the fireplace.

"How're you feeling, Mr. Harding?" asked Pooch.

"D'you mean me?"

"Yes," Pooch said.

He began leering again.

"Execrable," he said, "if not worse!"

And then he picked up the paper and heaved it in the fireplace and it burned down to ashes in nothing flat. Its only about three pages thick when you take out the advertising. "That happens to be the worst of the many unreadable papers ever printed," he said. "By God, one of these days I'll cancel my subscription and take a Detroit paper."

"That'll be the day," I said. "You've been saying that for the last ninety years——"

"Watch out, old man, you're dating yourself. Not to say exaggerating. I haven't hated that paper for a day over twenty years. It remains obtusely Republican in the face of overwhelming opposition."

With a groan my old man sat down in his easy chair again, and tipped over the beer bottle with his foot. A little beer dribbled out of the bottle onto the rug, and he looked at me and Pooch with a guilty smirk on his face. "Drunkenness," he said, "whets the

appetite but dulls the performance. A good line to remember, boys. Written by Shakespeare, that talented old reprobate.”

I picked up the beer bottle and drank down the few drops that were left.

My old man got a large charge out of that.

“Picking up the habit, eh? Before you get drunk would you get me another bottle of beer, Paul?”

“Paul won’t,” I said, “but I will.” I looked at Pooch. He was sitting on the edge of the piano bench with a sort of scared look on his face. My father seems to have a crazy effect on people. Maybe he would on me, too, except I know him too well, being his son. And I’m pretty used to everything he does. The great thing about him is, he says and does the maddest thing with a straight face—like the time Herby’s mother called our house to try and find him. Well, she happens to be very cranky and she spends half her life on the phone checking up on Herby. This one time she called my father answered, and if there are two things in the world he hates, besides our newspaper, they are cranky women and telephones. Her very first words were, “Where’s Herbert? Have you seen Herbert, Mr. Harding? I haven’t seen hide nor hair of him since early this morning! Is he with Owen, by any chance?” My old man cleared his throat and said in a very low voice, “I’m afraid that I have seen your son, madam.” He always calls women “madam” when he’s being sarcastic. “Yes—I certainly have seen your son. Terrible casualty! Awful! He fell into our cistern this afternoon and sank fast. We called the fire department immediately and my wife dived in after him, but he didn’t rise to the surface the usual three times. In fact he didn’t come up once, madam—he was too chubby, I’m afraid. . . .” My old man said afterwards to me and mom that Mrs. Tubbs screamed and hung up. And she never called our house about Herby again.

During dinner my folks asked us about school, and my mother thought it was terrible the way those seniors got away with cutting Pooch’s hair. Pooch just smiled bashfully and said he didn’t care; he’d get his head shaved and let it grow out even again. The meal was very good. My mother’s the greatest cook going, even though

she doesn't believe in changing the menu very often. We had roast beef and escalloped potatoes and brussels sprouts and stewed tomatoes, with squares of bread in it, and then for dessert hot apple pie with cheese that you're almost too stuffed to eat. After you finish one of her meals you have to roll away from the table.

When my father carved the meat he got sore at my mother for not leaving it rare enough on the inside. He stood at the head of the table looking at her over the top of his glasses, and pointed the carving knife and fork at her. "How many times do I have to tell you," he began, "that——"

And then the strangest thing happened. For a second my heart hurt my throat. My mother bent her head down and began crying. I couldn't ever remember seeing her cry before. She covered her face with her linen napkin, and then she got up from the table and ran upstairs. I couldn't look at my old man right then, but I heard him sit down, and heard the clink of the carving knife as it hit the plate. I looked at Pooch and he was bent over his plate, feeding his face very fast. I tried to eat my meal but I wasn't hungry any more.

"Owen——" I looked up at him. His eyes were sort of red and his glasses were steaming a little. "Owen—old man—I'm sorry." He told Pooch he was sorry too, and Pooch didn't look up from his plate but after a second he nodded his head up and down and shrugged his shoulders. Right then I felt sorry for everybody in my house, including me.

My old man went to the buffet and got the candles and put them in the middle of the table. We always light candles while we're having dessert because my old man wants it that way. It reminds me of the way they do things at the country club, which is I guess what he likes about it. I fiddled around with my food and wondered what mom was doing upstairs, and I thought maybe me or my old man should go up and see.

She came down a second later.

"Well," she said, "are you all ready for dessert? I have some hot apple pie for you, Pooch," and she ran her hand over his mangled hair. "I know how much you love my pie, and I can't pass up an

opportunity for a compliment.” Pooch smiled up at her and said he guessed he’d have a small piece. I could tell he wasn’t hungry and I wasn’t either and neither was my old man, but we all had some pie and we ate every damn bit of it, too.

When mom poured coffee for my old man and her, she lit the two candles. I noticed how thin she looked over the flame of the candles and how many lines there were around her mouth. New lines. She was beginning to look again like she looked when they took her to the hospital the first time. My old man told her about ninety-five times and in about ninety-five different ways how good the pie was, and I wished he hadn’t done that.

Me and Pooch went up to bed around ten-thirty, and I told him a couple of new Pat and Mike jokes that were pretty corny but funny. We both laughed very hard at them. And then we quit talking and Pooch went to sleep and started snoring. That was the first time I could remember that we hadn’t stayed up half the night talking.

4

A month later they took my mother to the hospital again for another operation. My old man took me out to eat most of the time. The night of the operation he took me to the City Club for dinner. The City Club is a private place and you have to be a member of the Fleming Country Club to get in. My old man was wearing his new tweed suit and he looked very sharp. He’d been hitting the bottle very hard all day and his eyes were redder than hell, and he kept wiping off his glasses. I looked like a beggar beside him. I was wearing a moldy sport shirt, my levis, and a crummy blue windbreaker that belongs to Paul.

“Dad,” I said, “let’s not go to the City Club. Let’s go to Mike’s for dinner. I’m not too hungry.”

Mike’s is a bar and grill downtown where they have the greatest hamburgs going, and if it isn’t too crowded Mike’ll serve me beer even though I’m a minor. Mike is a tubby guy who knows a million Greek songs and has a great sense of humor.

But my father said he didn’t want to go there, and he told me to

hurry up and change my clothes. After I got sharpened up a little, we took off down Miller Road for the City Club in his jalopy.

The place was very crowded for a change; I guess because some of the members brought their friends, and if there's one thing that really wounds my old man's vanity it's having to wait in lines. He can't stand it. The colored headwaiter was standing near us and my old man tapped him on the shoulder. "Hello there, Justin—how've you been?" The waiter smiled at him. "Say, Justin, see if you can manage to slip us in. My son here and I are in quite a hurry this evening."

He didn't talk to Justin like you do to somebody when you're really glad to see him. Some of the people waiting in the lobby were watching him, and I wanted to vanish through the floor or pretend I didn't know him. And I thought of all the times my mother must have felt like I felt right then. I started whistling.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harding," the waiter said politely, in a soft sort of southern drawl.

"Look here, Justin, it's important or I wouldn't make a point of it. We have a pressing engagement this evening. We don't want four or five tables—all we want is one, d'you see? Now, how about it?"

I closed my eyes and hoped that when I opened them I wouldn't be there.

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait, Mr. Harding," the waiter said. "There are three parties here ahead of you."

There was one awful second when I didn't know what my old man was going to do, and then he turned his back on Justin and walked over to where I was standing. We didn't say anything to each other, and I wished that I could've gone to that movie at the Michigan with Pooch and Bill and Deacon. It was another one of those stupid war movies with Randolph Scott, where he takes a whole island from the Japs singlehanded, but it was better than getting dressed up and acting richer and more important than you really were. I was pretty sure of that.

We finally got a table and the meal was fine until my father cut into his filet. I thought he would bust a gut. It wasn't quite bloody

enough for him, so he called the waiter over and told him to take it back and get a steak done properly. A couple of minutes later the waiter came back with a steak that was so fresh and raw I'd bet anything the fur was just peeled off. My old man loved it, and after he finished the steak he drank the rest of his dinner, ordering three cups of coffee royal, which is coffee with brandy or whisky mixed up in it.

He really had a load on by the end of the meal, and when we left the place I noticed his neck was very purple above the rim of his collar. His neck always got like that when he'd been drinking, sort of a checkerboard of pink and white and gray and red spots, but mostly purple.

We got in the heap and drove off. He drove the car just as much in the left lane as the right, and I felt like grabbing the wheel. He managed to miss all the other cars, though, or else they managed to miss him, which is more like it.

We drove out near the country where we live and then the main road went off to the right, and we took the dirt road that skirted Durant Woods, and went climbing up so high you could see the lights of downtown Fleming, like a cluster of fireflies, out on the right, and off to our left the wind moved through the dark woods and you couldn't see anything but you could hear the tree tops rustling. My father drove slowly along there because it was a dangerous stretch of road, and when we got to the bottom of the hill on the other side, he turned left and we drove six blocks south on Miller Road. We were home.

He left the motor running.

"All right," he said, "what's the matter? You haven't said a word since we finished eating—which isn't at all like you." Then he turned off the ignition, and I started to pile out of the car.

"Not so fast, Owen," he said. "I don't want you to leave until you tell me what's wrong. There's something bothering you."

I thought about what I could tell him and what I couldn't.

"I guess there is," I said. "I'm awful worried about mom."

He put his arm around me and I felt silly for a second, and then I was glad in a weird sort of way that he'd put his arm around me.

"I'm worried about her, too," he said, gripping my arm very hard. "Worried to death about her. Owen—your mother's always on my mind now. I can't think about anything else. When I think of all the things I've done to hurt her—all the many ways—and you and Paul. I've tried to be a good man, Owen; I really have tried to be." He turned around in the seat and looked at me. "Please try to believe me; I've tried my goddamnedest to be a good husband and father!" His voice started shaking. I felt awful. "I drink too much," he said. "I know that. God knows, I know that better than anyone else. And all the times I've been so mean to her, and so awfully thoughtless to you and Paul. I could cut off an arm for every single time. And so many times, like this evening, I've been nasty to waiters. And I've treated your mother like one so goddam many times . . . and I always make fun of your friends." He started crying softly, his head turned away from me.

"Don't, dad. There's no sense in blaming yourself for everything. It won't help any, and she probably wouldn't want to hear you talk this way." He was just drunk and tired and sad, and I tried to think of something funny or all right to say, but I wasn't feeling exactly happy myself. We sat there in the darkness and he lit his pipe and I could smell the heavy blue smoke but I couldn't see it. "Remember what Paul used to say, Dad?"

"He used to have a lot to say. Perhaps like myself, he said too many things."

"Well, remember what he'd say at the dinner table when he used to burp? 'It's better to burp and bear the shame than spare the burp and bear the pain.' Remember? He used to say it to Mom after he'd burped or something."

My old man looked at me over the top of his glasses and there was a sort of smile on his face. "I remember," he said.

"Well, you're burping to get rid of the pain, and that's good."

He looked at me for a long time.

"Thank you, old man."

"Oh, there's nothing to thank me for."

"Yes," he said, "there's plenty to thank you for."

"Okay—if you think there is."

He started the car then.

"I'd better run out to the hospital now," he said, "and see how everything is. Are you going to stay home and study?"

"I guess so. I hate to, but I'd better."

"Owen, you don't have to. It's up to you. I really mean that. You and I are on our own a lot these days, and we may be on our own much more in the future. So you do what you think best about the schoolwork—you'll have to begin making up your own mind about those things."

"Well," I said, "when you put it that way, I guess I *have* to do it."

And then we smiled at each other.

When he drove off a couple of minutes later I think he was almost sober.

I looked at the sky for a while. And then I went in the house and turned on a lot of lights.

At the end of that week I got my second month's report card, and if it could have been worse I don't know how. Maybe Bill could have managed it. Anyway, it could have been fifty times as good and still been lousy. I got an E in Geometry and Miss Thorn-dike attached a note to the card that was meant for my father. It said: "Your son shows a gift for drawing obscene pictures on the inside of his Geometry book, but no talent whatsoever for Geometry. Perhaps this is because he spends all his time in class drawing these pictures." It never got within a mile of my old man, though, because I burned the hell out of it behind Balder's grocery store. And that seemed to really impress Bill. About two seconds later he hauled out his Zippo lighter and burned up his report card, and lit a cigarette from it as it was burning up! What an idiot! Deacon damn near died, and Herby almost perished laughing, and Pooch thought we were both out of our minds. Bill was so proud about burning his stupid card that he had to tell everybody about it, even strangers, but I could tell that he was very frightened when he went home that night. Well, he really got in trouble for that. He got suspended from school for two weeks,

and do you know what he did all the time he was away? He spent days and nights at Farhat's playing Eight ball with the guys who worked in the Olds and Nash-Kelvinator plants. He cleaned them out. Day and night he had millions of suckers just begging him to take their money. And naturally he took their money as fast as he could rack up the balls for another game. He won over a hundred dollars during those two weeks, which almost makes you feel that going to school is a complete waste of time. Anyway, I burned up that note and didn't get caught, which is something.

I got a C in History, a D in Biology, a C in English, and an A in Band, plus that E in Geometry. What a dismal record. My mother had wanted me to make the honor roll, and her lying there in the hospital thinking that I'd probably made it this time. I felt like the lowest cad in history.

The report card had to be back in school, signed, on Monday, so on Saturday morning I went downtown to the post office and saw an old classmate of my brother's by the name of Sam Haney. Sam was as bad as I am in school and he knew every underhanded trick going. He gave me a bottle of ink eradiator and told me how to use it, and I went over to one of the writing tables and began pouring the junk on my card. Something went wrong somewhere. There were two bottles of the stuff and I must have used the wrong one first. The goddam report card came out looking blue, and when I tried to erase the smudges I tore the card to shreds.

On Monday morning I told Mr. Harris what happened. I said I forgot and left the card in my hip pocket, and the woman who washes our clothes put my pants through the Bendix, and I didn't know what happened to the card until I looked through the pants the next day and found what was left of it. I showed him what was left of it. I'm not sure how much I snowed Mr. Harris, but I got a new card filled in that afternoon, and when I went to get my E in Geometry I decided to shoot the breeze with Miss Thorndike about how I could pass the course. She kept grinning at me until I thought I'd go crazy. I ended up making a deal with her which was something I didn't think you could do with teachers. I talked her into giving me a D instead of an E if I'd hand in my lessons

every day, quit drawing and try and stay awake. It sure seemed like a lot to do for a lousy D, but I told her I'd do all those things. I'd have shaken on it too, but she wasn't the sort of person you could shake hands with. She kept doddering a little like a bowling pin that hasn't made up its mind to stand up or fall down so I took off, feeling good about the lousy D.

That night I hauled my old Elgin out of the basement, blew up the tires, and took off for the St. Lawrence Hospital over in South Fleming. My old man was in Battle Creek buying up a library for the store. He hadn't wanted to go because my mother was so sick, but she made him go.

I parked the bike beside the long stone stairs that climb up two flights to the hospital entrance, and put a lock on the back tire of my bike. I walked into the hospital, trying to hold my breath as long as I could, and thought about being anywhere except in a hospital. I can't stand that cruddy medicine smell you get as soon as you walk into a hospital. In St. Lawrence the thing I could smell the most was iodine. I kept waiting for blood to come gushing out of my nose, or my heart to stop beating. I thought about that awful chest cold I had last year, and the time I had that examination to go to Boy's State and my pulse beat was a hundred and ten, and the way I kept getting dizzy when I squatted down too long and then stood up very fast. Each time I visited mom I was a complete wreck all over again. I figured if I visited her enough times they'd have to give me a room, too. As I walked up to the reception desk I wished Herby or Pooch was with me, so I wouldn't have to keep feeling like talking to myself. I sure felt like talking to myself. Or whistling or singing.

Besides the medicine smells, you get all these very sad-looking nurses. They wear these white dresses that rustle like newspapers as they walk along, and every time one of them looks at me I feel like a patient. I got the pass from the desk and went up to the third floor in the elevator and walked down a long gray hall that didn't seem very well lit for a hospital and knocked at the door where they had my mother.

She was propped up in bed and a black Bible lay on the white

sheets. I told her how well she looked seeing she'd been operated on only a week ago. But she really looked very thin and sick. Her face was a sort of light gray with a little yellow here and there.

I sat down on the edge of the bed.

"How's my girl?" I said.

She smiled up at me.

"Just fine," she said.

"You look it, too," I told her.

She held my hand.

"What'd you fix yourself for dinner tonight, Owen?"

"A lot of things," I said, starting to think of all the things she'd make me eat if she was home. "I had some soup, string beans, and a can of that hash you keep in the basement, and some toast. Almost a quart of milk too. I'm getting to be almost as good a cook as you, Mom."

She asked me if I'd washed the dishes and cleaned out the sink and all that stuff, and I told her I had. Actually I didn't even eat at home. I had a plate of french fries and a couple of hamburgs at Mike's.

"You're not dressed warm enough," she told me.

"It's warm out tonight."

"Aren't you going to kiss me, darling?"

"Sure," I said, and I kissed her on the forehead.

"And for your father, too," she said.

I kissed her on the left cheek for my old man and on the right one for Paul.

She started coughing and it was the thinnest cough I've ever heard. It was almost like the sound a doll makes when you squeeze it together at the middle. I poured her a glass of water from the pitcher on the night table, and she drank about three drops of it.

"Isn't this your marking period week?" she asked me after a minute. I figured there was no sense in stalling around and acting like a baby about it.

I pulled the report card out of my windbreaker. "Here's the bad news," I said.

She took a very fast look at it, and then turned it over and signed it without saying anything. She gave it back to me.

"It stinks, doesn't it, Mom?"

"You've done much worse, Owen," she said, and then she closed her eyes. Lying there like that, with her eyes closed and the blue circles under them, she almost looked like she wasn't living. I got very scared about it even though I knew I was silly.

"Are you all right?"

She opened her eyes and looked at the white wall across the room. "Yes, thank you, darling, I'm fine."

I gulped down the water that she'd hardly touched. Then I poured another glassful and drank that down too.

She opened the Bible that was laying on her lap.

She ran her hand down the black leather.

"Would you read to me, Owen?"

"Out of that?" I said.

"Yes, darling. Read the Twenty-third Psalm. That's a particular favorite of mine. I've been having your father read it to me lately. I know it by heart. I'd like to hear you read it. I'll just lie here with my eyes closed."

I picked up the Bible, and it wasn't hard to find that Psalm because she had marked the place with a black ribbon. There was something about the way the page felt—like an old, wrinkled piece of silk—that made me feel very gloomy. And I didn't exactly know why she wanted me to read this stuff. She never used to, even when she was sick before. She always used to like stories about small towns and families, and people like me and Paul and my father, where you could recognize things and you could laugh once in a while. But the Twenty-third Psalm was just a lot of words to me, and the more she liked stuff like that, the less I could understand what was happening to her.

But I cleared my throat and began reading.

I read it slow and pronounced all the words right, but I wasn't listening to any of the words. I was thinking about why my mother was here and I was here, and outside some place were all the rest of the people I knew doing the things they'd always done, and not

having to do new things like sitting in hospitals and having operations and reading Bibles during the week.

By the time I got to the line that says, "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever," I tried to tell myself not to think about things like this. Because if I thought about everything too much, I might get very screwed up and not be able to figure out anything anyway.

I left at nine o'clock and rode home on my bike as fast as I could. The night had gotten colder and the moon wasn't in the sky and there weren't any stars to speak of either.

During the rest of that week and part of the next, I studied like a dopey honor girl who never gets asked to dances. I took my books up to the attic, which isn't really an attic because my mother had it made into a den for my old man. There's a thick carpet on the floor, and a big gas heater near the window that almost blows up every time you look at it, and my old man had tall bookcases with glass windows built in along all the walls. It's the greatest place going to study, because my folks can't hear me if I decide to play records or do something besides study.

During that time I was also busy studying the sousaphone. We had a lot of formations to learn for all the football games we were playing, and we had to stay after school a lot of the time because our formations were pretty bad. The thing you have to learn is how to play and march at the same time. That's about as easy as juggling seven dozen oranges with one hand. Hardly anybody can do it. You find that some of the kids in the band play well and march lousy and the others play lousy and march well. And then there are a few guys like Langley, the other sousaphone player, who are lousy all the way around and never get any better. I've settled on good marching myself, because once I made the wrong turn out on the field and marched over the fifty-yard line while the band was going the other way. If you've ever done anything like that you know what a nervous wreck it can make you. So now I just pretend I'm playing and let Langley make all the noise he wants to on his

sousaphone. He never hits the right notes, but he's the loudest bastard I've ever heard.

My old man had to spend the whole week in New York at a publishers' convention. He wasn't going to go, but mom was feeling a little better and thought he shouldn't put it off. I invited Deacon and Pooch over to my house on Saturday night. Herby had to stay home and take care of his five million brothers and sisters. I spent two hours in the afternoon with my mother at the hospital and then I went home and fixed myself dinner. I had four peanut butter and jam sandwiches, a box of Velveeta cheese and a quart of milk, and then I scrounged around the kitchen until I dug up the orange juice squeezer and made myself a malted. I felt dizzy than hell when I went upstairs to take a bath.

After I dried myself and cleaned up the black ring around the bathtub, I took a look at those three blond hairs that were growing on my upper lip. I'd been watching them every day for over two months, and they finally looked long enough to cut. So I hauled out my old man's electric razor, plugged in the cord and shaved off the three hairs. Then I went over the rest of my face for practice. After I was done my face felt very raw, so I plastered myself with some green shaving lotion which hurt like hell. My face felt like somebody was beating it with a hairbrush. By the time I got dressed I still smelled like a cosmetics counter, so I scrubbed my face with soap and boiling hot water until the smell went away. When I went down to answer the doorbell, I could only open my mouth about a half an inch, my face felt so stiff and sore. I decided to wait next time until I had more than three hairs before I screwed around with shaving again. Pulling those hairs out by the roots would've been just as easy.

"You've got the stupidest driveway I've ever seen," was the first thing Deacon said when he walked in the house. "If the heap's half on the lawn don't blame me. You can't see anything out there, it's so dark."

Pooch followed Deacon in, kicked off his loafers, picked up the new copy of *Life* and sprawled his long frame out on the davenport.

I took a look outside to see what Deacon was bitching about.

"Don't blame me," he said; "blame whoever built the stupid driveway."

"How could you miss the driveway and hit the flower bed? Where'd you get your license anyway, at a raffle?"

"It's not my fault, O.H.," he said.

"I understand," I said. "It's a crummy plot. When the driveway saw you coming it changed places with the flower bed."

"You're so funny you make me feel like crying. I'd like to see you do better."

"Why don't you both keep it down," Pooch said. "I'm looking at pictures."

"I'd do better, Deacon. I'd drive the stupid car in the driveway, and not all over my mother's flowers."

"Yes, you would!"

"I bet you I would."

"You try it and you'll see, Doctor."

"I would, Deacon."

"Just try it and see."

"What d'you mean, saying 'You try it and you'll see' all the time, Deacon? What d'you think I'll see?"

"I'll tell you what you'll see," he said. "You'll prob'ly wreck the car. You don't even know how to drive yet."

"Shut up," Pooch said. "Why don't you both drop dead."

"I'd drive it in the driveway, except it's your car. You drive it in the driveway."

"No, you do it," Deacon said. "Let's see the master do it. I'm calling your bluff, Doctor."

"What bluff?" I yelled. "I'm not bluffing. I'm telling you to move that goddam car. I'm commanding you!"

"Why don't you both shut up for two seconds," Pooch said. "Can't you see I'm trying to look at a few pictures?"

"I called your bluff and you're chickening out," said Deacon. "You know you can't drive. You don't even know the throttle from the motor block!"

"Button your lip," I said as coolly as I could. "Just button your lip."

"Why don't you do it if you're so smart?" Deacon said with a smile on his face that made me want to lunge at him for a second. "I'll give you a dollar if you can drive the boat in right."

"Button your lip," I said again. I was feeling a little nervous. "Just kindly button your lip."

He started laughing. "I guess you've proved what a big liar——"

"If you don't button your big fat stupid goddam lip for one second," I yelled, "I'm going to be forced to heave you out of here on your can!"

"You both make me sick," Pooch said, and he got up from the davenport. "I'll move the car. You guys just slug it out and get it over with by the time I get back. You can't even look at pictures in peace around here."

So Pooch moved the car, and to tell the honest truth I never felt so relieved in all my life. My old man gave me a driving lesson once but that was over a year ago, and I couldn't remember anything about it if I had to. Deacon was right about my not knowing the throttle from the motor block, but I sure wasn't going to admit it. It's bad enough to tell a lie in the first place without going around admitting it. That sure would be dumb.

"Let's get drunk," Pooch said when he came back from moving the car. "We'll break into your dad's liquor cabinet, Owen."

"Great, Doctor! Wow—what a great idea!" Deacon said. "I haven't been drunk in one hell of a long time."

"You sure haven't, have you?" Pooch said. "Let's see—at least fifteen or sixteen years, I'd say."

"No," I said. "Remember, Pooch, the time the three of us and Bill drove out in the country with a case of beer? We drank a whole case of beer, and some of that very pukey muscatel. And Deacon, old killer Deacon, skoaled about six bottles one right after another. Didn't you, Deacon?"

Deacon said it was only four bottles he skoaled. The truth is, he actually skoaled only about one and a half bottles, but we were friends again anyway. I think Pooch was the only one of us who'd

ever had anything stronger than wine, although to hear Bill tell it he was in pretty bad shape at the age of seven.

"Come on," Pooch said, "where's the key to the cabinet? Let's get the show on the road."

We opened the cabinet and dragged out a bottle of white stuff called kummel, and some green crap that was called crème de menthe, and something called crème de cacao that was very muddy-looking. After scrounging around in the kitchen for a while I came up with a bottle of orange bitters that I figured we could use, too.

"Has that junk got alcoholic content?" asked Pooch after he smelled the bitters.

"Who knows," I said.

"Sure it has," Deacon said. "We use it in martinis and stuff at home. It's alcoholic all right."

We put the bottles on the dining room table, and I got two trays of ice cubes out of the Frigidaire.

"Hey, Owen, get a big bowl," Pooch shouted out to me. "We're going to mix all these together and make punch."

I couldn't find a very big bowl, so I lugged an old tin dishpan into the dining room.

"This sounds crazy to me, Pooch," I said. "When you make punch don't you use something that isn't alcoholic?"

"This is alcoholic punch," Pooch said. "The real thing. Watch it, Deac. That's enough of the brown stuff—now pour in about an inch of the green."

"Righto. A finger of creamy mint, sir."

We put in some of all the kinds of stuff we had, and then Deacon walked into the kitchen. I heard him open the Frigidaire. "Here's something we can throw on top," he said. "Cherries."

"Deacon, leave the goddam cherries alone. How many times do I have to tell you. My dad has seventeen hemorrhages when he finds them gone."

"We're drinking his liquor, O.H.," he said. "That's worse."

"But he doesn't know about it. This is the first time, and he won't suspect anything."

"Just wait'll he finds out," Deacon said. "I'm telling you, I don't want to be around when he does!"

Pooch pulled three bottles of beer out of the Frigidaire.

"Look what I found," he said. "I love beer."

"So do I," Deacon said. "More than girls even."

"What're you going to do with it?" I said.

"Pour it in with the other stuff, of course. Give it just that right, final touch."

He poured it in.

"I'll bet we all die," I said. "Pretty soon you'll want to put in some iodine, witch hazel and hair tonic."

"Hey, that's really the smoothest idea yet," said Deacon. "Where's the medicine cabinet? Somebody lead me to the medicine cabinet."

It wasn't what Deacon said, but pretty soon everything we said was killing. All three of us were laughing our heads off. All we had to do to start in laughing again was look at each other's faces and we almost cracked up. It was the first time in weeks I got my mother out of my mind and had some fun like I used to. I laughed harder than either of them.

When we calmed down a little, we drew from a pack of cards to see who would take the first drink. None of us wanted to drink first. The low card man was it, and Pooch drew an eight of spades. He dipped in with the soup ladle and filled his glass all the way to the top, and we sat there at the table waiting. Pooch took a small swallow and sat down with a thud. He leaned way back in his chair and began breathing very quickly through his mouth.

"Yuuuuuummm!" he said.

He looked at us, or sort of between us, with his eyes very glazed and said, "I'll say it's good. It's a little hot in the throat and the stomach, but after that it's fine." He picked up his glass and took another drink, a longer one, and went through that chair-tipping and mouth-breathing routine again. I was beginning to get drunk just watching him.

After he took another swallow and saw we hadn't taken any yet, he started getting P Od, and Pooch isn't the kind of guy you

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like to see get P Od. He's a pretty big guy and he can get a little pushy sometimes. So me and Deacon took a drink, and the taste of mine almost killed me. Turpentine or gasoline couldn't have been any worse than that ungodly combination. After the second drink it was easier to take, though, and the stuff began to really taste good, and after a couple of more it didn't seem any stronger than Coca-Cola. And it tasted ten times as good.

I began noticing that every time Deacon didn't keep his mouth shut, his teeth started chattering.

While it was still fairly easy to get out of my chair, I put ten Kenton sides on the record player, and when the last side, "Willow Weep for Me," dropped down, we just left it on to play over and over again.

"Chriss I'm drunk," Pooch said.

"Shom I," I said.

"Drunker'n'ell."

"Shom I, Poochy-woochy."

"Not shick though."

"My wees are kneeck," Deacon said, when he got up to go to the bathroom. "My wees are really kneeck."

"Your knees are weak is whatcha mean," Pooch said.

"Thassha ticket," Deacon said. "Thanks, buddy old socko-kiddo!"

And then Deacon headed for the living room instead of the bathroom, and he heaved his cookies all over the front steps.

Well, we kept drinking that goddam mess until every time I looked at the wall it crawled up to the ceiling. When I closed my eyes I seemed to float right out of my chair, and I started keeping one hand under the table for leverage. When the stuff started to run low, Pooch staggered into the kitchen, came back with the coffee pot and emptied all the cold coffee into the pan. On top of that he poured in what was left of the orange bitters, and mixed the stuff around with his fist. All three of us sat there looking at it.

The phone must have rung ten times before I got over to answer it. It seemed that every goddam time I lifted my leg to take a step, my knee banged into my jaw.

"Lo," I said. "This is schity morgue. Gruesome L. Tombslab speaking. We take bodies here of every size, shape and scription."

"Why hello, deary. This is your dead wife, Rigorine. Your dinner's getting cold. I cooked some juicy spare ribs from that body you brought home last week. Some prime, moldy bits on that one. Yes indeedy, deary!"

"Who's shat. Shat you, Herby?"

"Yes—you drunk, Owen?"

"Sssuuuuuurree am!"

"No kidding. I don't believe you. Who's there with you, anyway?"

"Deacon, Pooch, me, a dishpan and "Willow Weep for Me."

"My gosh, you are drunk!"

"You shaid that once. Don't shay it again. You should be here, Herby old pal. No kidding, you really should be here. Boy, I'm so drunk I'm polluted. What I am, Herby I'm just drunk, drunker, drunkest, drunkenest."

"Owen, I've got something to tell you——"

"And——"

"Now listen to me."

"—and—and now let me tell you, Herby——"

"Come on, try and listen to me for one second. You know that girl you've been telling me about? Barbara Alslinger?"

"Shenior at Cornell. Very shmart. Honor girl."

"Yes, I know. Well, what happened was, my——"

"Very shmart honor girl, if you ask me."

"Okay, Owen, listen to me, for gosh sakes, and quit yapping. My sister, Mary, takes piano lessons with Barbara, and guess who's been calling her up and asking her for dates?"

"Thass shom question. Can't magine. Gary Cooper? Micker Rooney? Lhassie?"

"No, Bill. Bill's——"

"You mean Bill Butler? Bill the Shilver Prince?"

"Yes. Bill's got a crush on her, I guess. And he's been keeping it to himself. Anyway, Owen, he's got a date with her tomorrow night."

I didn't say anything for a minute and my head began to stop spinning, but I could feel all that crud in my stomach like a hard rock. I knew I was going to be very sick to my stomach.

"I just thought maybe you'd want to know, Owen."

"Thangs for telling me, Herby. Sure I wanted to know. Thangs a million for telling me, Herby. You know something? You're one of the best pals——"

"Hold on a sec, Owen. My folks just walked in."

I didn't move one single muscle until Herby came back to the phone. I felt like if I moved one muscle right then, I'd float out through the window or spin along the floor like a top.

"You still there?" Herby said.

"I guess sho. I'm not very sure but I guess sho."

"My folks want to know how your mother's coming along. How is she, Owen?"

I pressed my nose very hard against the receiver.

"Herby—Herby, I've got a great joke to tell you. . . ."

It's funny. I couldn't think of any joke at all.

"How is your mother, Owen?"

"I don't know, Herby. Gosh, I don't know really. I don't know at all."

"Don't you go to the hospital every day?"

I thought I would break my nose, I pressed it against the receiver so hard.

"You do, don't you?"

I felt tears coming into my eyes, and I began biting my lower lip very hard.

"Yes," I said.

"My folks feel bad about it, Owen. They want you to know they do. And you know how I feel. Listen, they want you to come over for supper more often. Your dad, too, if he wants to come."

I stuck my thumb and finger into my eyes and squeezed like hell.

"I don't think my father'll come, Herby. He's a very funny sort of guy. He's funny about things. But you know I'll come shomtimes, Herby; I want you to know that."

And then the stupid tears were coming down my cheeks, and my stomach started catching.

"What's the matter?" Herby said. He sounded scared. "You sick, Owen?"

"Herby, I love her more than anything else in the world. And she's there at the St. Lawrence. For crissake, all I want to know is, I want to know why she's there? Why is she there, Herby? Thass all. And two billion goddam healthy people around——"

"Owen? Owen?"

And then I had to hang up. I ran out beside the evergreen trees and threw up until nothing would come out any more. The ground was very cold outside and I could feel it through my pants as I knelt there puking my guts out. And then after I was through throwing up, I kept gagging for a while before I could go back inside.

Pooch and Deacon got home that night somehow, and I can just barely remember the details. I can remember Pooch grabbing my mother's best Wedgwood plate off the buffet, and Deacon staggering out to the living room to take it on a long pass, and how I threw a flying tackle at Pooch before he got the pass off. Me and Pooch and the Wedgwood plate hit the floor together, and somehow the plate didn't get broken.

And I can remember Deacon standing in the cold shower upstairs with his clothes on, and Pooch snapping him with a damp towel to sober him up. God, he yelled! And after Pooch told Deacon he'd drive him home I couldn't remember anything more, and when I woke up in the morning my head was on theavenport, downstairs, and my feet were draped over the coffee table.

I had the first hangover of my life that morning. I drank five glasses of water, one right after another, and got drunk all over again. "Willow Weep for Me" was still playing, and the sad sounds the trombone made split my head right down the middle like a walnut. I turned off the phonograph, and then cleaned up the house. I cleaned up the house for four hours and it still looked very seedy. I got worried that my old man would notice the liquor

gone from the bottles, so I filled them full of water and heaved them back in the liquor cabinet. After that I passed out on the davenport for the rest of the afternoon.

I didn't go see my mother that day. I figured if she saw me in the crummy shape I was in, she'd ask me a million questions, and I felt too tired to make up any decent lies. So I just didn't go to the hospital that day, and tried not to think too much about not going.

It was after I woke up that I began thinking about what Herby had told me on the phone. So Bill, the Tyrone Power, Bob Feller, Horatio Alger and Tom Swift of Cornell High School had a crush on Barbara. I almost got sick all over again. The combination of their two names got me to feeling pretty low.

I guess I might as well say right now that Bill's always been very popular with girls, and when I was just a kid, about two years ago, I used to admire him very much. He always knew how to do the cleverest tricks on his bike. He would wink at girls in a way that had them blushing every time. And he could wear his cap at a million sharp angles, turn up one corner of his mouth when he laughed and lift his eyebrow while he was laughing so that every good-looking girl going signed his name in their character book. It was really disgusting. I hated him for being that way. I started going home to practice how to be like Bill in the mirror. But when I tried to do all that hammy stuff it never came off. Nobody took me for Bill—not even Peggy English who had a crush on me and would believe most anything I told her. I was still just Owen Harrison Harding. And, besides, that laughing out of the corner of my mouth and raising my eyebrow stuff really annoyed the hell out of my mother, and she seemed very relieved when I quit trying to be like Bill.

That night after I fried a couple of eggs and felt better, I decided to ride my bike over to Barb's house and try to horn in on Bill. Her father's name was R. Lucius Alslinger, and I looked up the address in the phone book. They lived on Dexter Drive, which is a very good address for the center of town. Snow was beginning to fall

outside. I put on Paul's black Mackinaw jacket and took off on my bike.

On the way over to her house I almost perished. It happens to me every time I'm in a mad rush to get some place. I caught my pants in the goddam bicycle chain, and nearly went sailing head-first over the handle bar. It took me three years to get my pants loose from the chain, and I sat there in the street swearing my head off. Right in the middle of "bastardly something-or-other," an old man and woman passed by me and they must have thought I was crazy. God, I felt silly! I tried to pretend I'd been singing a song all the time, and I broke out in my raspy tenor with "Heavenly shades of night are falling—it's twi-ilight time," and as soon as they got down the street a ways I began swearing like crazy again.

Finally I got to 703 Dexter Drive, and when I saw the lights on in her shack—that's when I lost my nerve. I knew I wasn't going to go knocking on any doors, and go through a stupid scene like in some Hollywood movie. Bill would have probably liked me to. He could have beat me up then. Sometimes I think that Bill sees everything in the world in Technicolor.

I got off my bike and stood behind the big oak tree on her front lawn, in case somebody decided to look out the window. I kept my eyes peeled on the front window, but nobody walked by inside. It was very cold out there and I kept blowing on my hands, but all I managed to do was get dizzy and out of breath. I had visions of Barb coming out in the morning to find me frozen to death. When she found me like that, she'd haul me into the house to thaw me out, and spend the whole day weeping over my dead body and wish like hell she'd got to know me better. She'd put me near the radiator to thaw me out, and right then she'd pledge her undying love for me. Well, then the heat would start my heart beating again, and I'd take her in my arms and we'd get married the next day and live happily ever after. It's funny the ideas you get when you're standing out in the cold, freezing and miserable.

Another thing I saw was how I'd get very wealthy about ten years from now, and I'd be walking down the street with Barbara. She'd be smothered in fox furs and I'd be wearing a top hat and

tails, and who should we pass on the street but old beggar Bill, the town oddity, selling pencils without any lead in them. I would feel sort of sorry for my old high school buddy, so I'd set him up in business. He would love me for that and want to be my faithful servant forever, and Barb would love me all the more for being so kind and understanding to a no-good, hard-up bum.

God, I was cold!

I kept looking at the window, but I guess whatever they were doing people don't do in front of windows. I took one of my fingers and bent it back to see if it would break off.

Just as I was about to climb on my bike and take off, Bill came strolling by the window with a glass of something in his hand. It must have been milk because what else would a dumb bastard drink that's always in training for something? Hot chocolate maybe. He was wearing his yellow sweater with the big W on the front and the back, that he got at West Junior for playing basketball, football and baseball. He was laughing his stupid head off about something that I'll bet a million dollars wasn't funny. He sat down on the davenport. The davenport was up against the window so I could only see the back of his big head, and after a little while Barbara sat down beside him. I was waiting for their two heads to move together.

But they didn't. And after I screwed around waiting for a while longer I decided to take off. As I climbed on my bike I looked up at the oak tree, and it was so tall when I was right under it that I couldn't tell where the tree ended and the sky began. The trunk of the tree was thick and black, and the limbs branched out very wide, shivering a little in the wind. Right then I got a silly urge to chop down that tree. I wanted to take an ax and clobber the hell right out of that tree. I wanted to see that tree come crashing down to the ground, and I've never felt anything like that before. And if I'd had an ax I would have done it. Now isn't that the most insane thing you ever heard in your life?

5

By the end of November my mother was better. She could sit by the window in the hospital and knit and read, and she didn't

get sick every time she tried to eat something. But just when me and my old man figured she'd be coming home, Doc Goody said she'd have to be operated on again.

We were both there to comfort her when Doc Goody gave her the bad news, but the way it ended up she had to comfort my father. He cried very hard. She stroked his neck, sort of soothing him like she did with me the time I hit a curb and went headfirst over my bike and bashed my face all up. It was funny, though. The more she babied him, the harder he cried. And the harder he cried, the more I knew I'd never be able to somehow. I just stood there and watched and didn't feel anything at all. As I stood there watching I must have looked like I didn't care about my mother. I kissed her a couple of times, and stood around like an idiot the rest of the time. It was awful. My father crying, Doc Goody doddering all over the place, my mother smiling all the time. God, I hated that! Why did she have to smile?

When I got home I got to feeling bad about the cold-blooded way I acted. I sat in the kitchen and thought about mom for over two hours. I thought about her having six or seven more operations, and getting thinner and yellower after each one, and all the time I thought like this I kept making sobbing noises and heaved my stomach in and out. But I couldn't cry. My eyes were very dry. I even tried holding an onion up to my face, but that only made my eyes sting.

But when I wasn't thinking about her, I thought about Barbara. I began thinking about her a lot right after the night I rode over to her house to see her. She didn't really mean much to me until that night Herby called me up and said Bill was trying to make time with her, and then I guess she got to mean something to me in a big hurry.

So I began bumping into her at her locker. She had hers on the third floor and mine was on the first, but I made it look very accidental every time. I would say, "Well, it sure is a small world, isn't it?" or something corny like that. A couple of times I carried her books home for her. Once I asked her to go to the movie *Dragon Seed*, but she said she'd already seen it. "Bill Butler kept

asking me so I finally went with him," she said, and I said, "Is that the first time you ever went dutch?" but she didn't think that was very funny. "You mean you took *him*?" I asked her, but she didn't seem to think that was very funny either. So then I laughed and said I'd seen the movie myself. I told her I took Mary Zeller, who was the sharpest girl I could think of that Barbara knew. That went over like a lead balloon. "Oh, did you enjoy it?" she said, like she didn't believe I'd seen the movie at all. I told her I thought it was the crummiest movie going. That ended that. We walked the rest of the way to her house without saying anything.

The first day of December was a Monday, and I began working in my old man's store after school was over at three-thirty. I always work for him during December—five afternoons a week after school lets out and all day Saturday. I've worked for him during the Christmas rush for the last three years, and Paul did it before me. It's really a wild way to spend a month. You meet the maddest kind of people; the kind that buy books only during December, and then they don't buy them for themselves. Those kind of people buy Bibles on the twenty-second of December and expect you to ship them out to Tibet in plenty of time for Christmas. Some of the people are worse than that. One time this very fat guy came in and said he wanted eight yards of books. I said any special sort of books? and he said he didn't care one way or the other, so I showed him a set of moldy Dickens that was a mile long and he said that was okay by him. But his wife, who was as skinny as he was fat, spoke up in a very feeble voice and said why get Dickens when she'd already read him? Why not get Shakespeare or something? Well, you should have seen the very fat guy then. He gave her a pukey smile and said, "Hell, darling, you know they're not to read anyway. They're purely for the purpose of decoration." Then the guy gave me a big slap on the back and a stupid wink and said, "Wrap them up, sonny boy. And send them along." All I know is, I sure did feel sorry for that skinny wife of his.

It was snowing when me and Pooch walked downtown after

school. Some of the young kids already had their sleds out. Some of the older kids were having snowball fights. I packed one very hard, icy snowball in case somebody heaved one at me.

We slid along on some ice for a ways, and then when we crossed Main Street we started fooling around. Pooch walked up to me and bowed, clicking his heels; ran his hand through his mustache and twirled his cane. "Hello there, George," he said.

"How's it going, Minty?"

He was always Mr. Mintbank and I was always George in this game.

"We must have a serious conversation, George."

"That's the goddam truth," I said.

"I'll come right to the point," he said, pulling out his wallet. "You can't marry my daughter. Why, George you're the garbage collector's son!"

I just gave him a cocky grin.

"I'll give you a million tax-free dollars," he said, "and a few of my estates if you'll forget about Cookie."

I took the check he gave me and tore it up without taking my eyes off him, and I didn't change my expression either. That's the way it is in the movies—the hero never gets too nervous about tearing up million-dollar checks. "I love that gal of yours, Minty. Money don't make any difference."

"Why you could never make Cookie happy!" he said. "She's society, George, and to be frank, you collect her garbage."

"Love takes care of all that stuff," I said wisely.

"All right, George," he said, "if you can convince my daughter to marry you I'll make you a gentleman. I'll bring you into my club and teach you how to shoot and ride. If you fail—then you'll have to learn to know your place!"

So then Pooch became Cookie. He waved his hips and rolled his eyes, and he was generally the awfulest-looking girl I've ever seen.

"Fathaah said you wanted to see me, dahling."

"Yeah, I do, Cookie." I pinched Pooch's cheek, and a little kid who was cleaning the runners on his sled gave us the strangest

look. "We're practicing for a play," I told the kid, but he just kept giving us the strangest look.

"Cookie," I said, "your old man don't want me to marry you. He says I lack blue blood."

"Dahling," Pooch said, "fathaah is a frightful fool."

"Cut the accent, honey, and give me the straight poop. Will you marry me?"

"Of course I will, dahling. What othaah man is there for me? You're so much nicer than all the rich boys I've been brought up with. And you have such fabulous courage, hunting down Nazis for the Govaahnment."

Then I dropped the smiling mask and began pawing the hell out of Pooch. "*Mein fräulein, mein fräulein!*" I drooled.

"Dahling, what filthy hands you haahv!"

"Better to paw you with, *Fräulein*."

"And what an odd tattoo that is on your hand!"

"That's a swastika, *Fräulein!*" I shouted.

Pooch told me to keep it down a little because Miss Reynolds and Miss Thorndike were walking along on the other side of the street, looking in our direction.

"My name's Herr von Loutswine," I said, quieter. "The famous German general, posing as your American boy friend, George Jones."

Pooch put his hand to his mouth and screamed with a cultivated accent. He had that cultivated accent down pretty well. All you have to do is go out to the Fleming Country Club and keep your ears open.

"You mean my dahling George is—is—?"

"Dead, *fräulein*," I said. "Dead."

But of course old George wasn't any deader than you or me or we wouldn't have had a decent movie story. As soon as Pooch playing Cookie fainted, I changed back to George and had a battle with the part of myself playing the German general and killed him. It was an easy fight. I took care of the bastardly Nazi with one whistling punch to the jaw.

And after that things turned out swell for me and Cookie. Minty

got to like me and gave Cookie and me his blessings. Besides the blessings he gave me *ten million tax-free dollars!* and all the estates he owned! He said when he was young he'd been poor just like me—old George the garbage collector—and that he really admired the hell out of me. He said that the poor were better than the rich any day, and so we had a real happy ending. Everybody ended up kissing everybody.

"We ought to get a job writing movie scripts," I said.

Pooch agreed with me.

I'd made up the characters and every time we saw a new movie we had Mr. Mintbank and Cookie and the others play the parts. They seemed to fit pretty well for most every movie. I didn't think we were much worse than most of the movies were, and sometimes we were funnier. We used to do the acts for Herby and the other guys, but they got sick of it, so after that we did it only for our own enjoyment.

My father wasn't in the store. Mrs. Kaywoodie and Mr. Cannon were waiting on customers. Pooch went in the back of the store where we kept all the sex books and everything that Jack Woodford wrote. He would still be there at five-thirty when the store closed, and I'd have to drag him away. He says he likes to read all the sex books because he might want to become a doctor, and the first time he thought that up was when my old man caught him in the back room one day. Now I think Pooch really believes it. Maybe that's the way a lot of people become doctors.

When my old man isn't in the store Mrs. Kaywoodie is in charge. She's strange. She doesn't have to work because her husband has a lot of money, but she's crazy about books. She says it's fun just to hold a book in your hands—if it's an old leather-bound book—and if you give her half a chance she'll spend all day reading poetry out loud to you. She was an English teacher in Vermont before she got married. Isn't it funny that somebody who likes books so well hates the people who buy them? She can't stand to wait on people; she gets very crabby.

Mr. Cannon is even stranger than she is, but I like him a lot better. He's seventy-one years old and just about everything bad

in the world has happened to him, but he's the most humorous old guy going. He was married twice and both of his wives died, and his only son was killed in the first war. He spends all his time practicing Yoga. He walks around the shop all day stretching his muscles and muttering to himself. When somebody tries to buy a book from him that he doesn't like, he won't sell it. He'll send the customer to me or Mrs. Kaywoodie, and start walking around the store very fast doing his exercises and swearing out loud. You should hear the old guy swear. He knows every new slang word going, and if he feels good he'll walk up to Mrs. Kaywoodie, give her one hell of a slap on the back and say, "I'm cooking on the front burner, woman," or if she says something that's sort of dense, he'll say, "You're really sharp as a marble, woman." Mrs. Kaywoodie can't stand him. Another thing the old guy loves to do is fool around with girls. Last year my father hired a girl from Fleming College to work part time during Christmas, and in less than a week Mr. Cannon was taking her out and buying her drinks and dinner, and pinching the hell out of her. Christmas Eve he carried a piece of mistletoe around with him and kissed her about forty times. She called him senile behind his back.

After I washed my hands and put on a tie in the back of the store, I came out front. Mr. Cannon was sitting at my father's desk fiddling around with order slips. Even though my father owns the store and Mrs. Kaywoodie is his assistant, Mr. Cannon acts like the boss. He used to work in James Rodney & Company's bookstore in New York and he knows all about rare books, so my old man lets him do most of the ordering. And he bosses the hell out of Mrs. Kaywoodie when he doesn't feel good, like last Christmas when he asked her where she was hiding the books on decorating and she didn't understand him. He can't stand it when you don't understand him. "The decorating books, woman!" he yelled, "the goddam books on d-e-c-o-r-a-t-i-o-n-g!" And he leaped at the nearest bookcase and began pawing through the books and knocking them on the floor. She likes him less every year.

"How're you today, Mr. Cannon?" I said, smiling at him. He

likes me because I kid around with him a lot. "Have you sold any copies of *The Robe* today?"

"Not a goddam one," he said. "Thank God!"

"How's the Yoga?" I said.

He made me walk over and feel his muscle while he flexed his arm. He's in very good shape for an old man.

"I guess I'll have to take that up, Mr. Cannon."

"You'd goddam well better," he said. "Your generation has one foot in the grave. They take vitamins, for crissake! And eat food out of packages!"

"We get the young girls, though," I said.

"They're just as goddam badly off," he said.

"But they are young girls."

He smiled at me through his thick glasses, and his smile is very queer because he has only one real eye. His eyes are very small and they seem to swim back and forth and not really look at any one thing, and they don't change at all when he smiles.

"You don't know what a girl's for, sonny."

"Maybe I don't," I said, "but if I did know, I could do something about it."

I guessed I had him there.

"Get the hell out of the office," he said, "and let me work. Go out there and sell some books and shoot the breeze with that woman."

My old man says that he's never heard him call Mrs. Kaywoodie anything except "that woman."

I started straightening out the books on the main counter. A very fat woman walked in the store and Mrs. Kaywoodie waited on her. The woman had an awful-looking hat on that looked like a bowl of rotten fruit. I walked into the back room to see if Pooch was all hot and bothered, and when I came back Mrs. Kaywoodie was showing the woman some Bibles and she'd already pulled half of them out of the case.

"What exactly are you looking for?" Mrs. Kaywoodie asked her. "It might help if I knew what you were after." Mrs. Kaywoodie

stood there with her hands on her hips, and the fat woman kept fingering the Bibles and adjusting her glasses.

The fat woman adjusted her glasses in Mrs. Kaywoodie's direction.

"I have a son in the service as I said. He ought to have a Bible with him, you know. Something—well, something that has the religious look, I would say. Perhaps black might be best, you know."

"Really?" Mrs. Kaywoodie said like she didn't know.

"Smallish," the fat woman said, and then giggled about something. "But the type must be large, you see, because he suffers from faulty vision. Poor boy! He's worn glasses ever since he was this high, you know." She put her hand out about two feet from the floor.

Mrs. Kaywoodie took a small Bible out of the case and unwrapped the tissue paper from it. It was one of those metal-plated, bulletproof jobs.

"Here is just the thing for a service man," she said. "You simply can't go wrong with this because it's safe. *Many many* boys have been saved by wearing this Bible over their heart." Mrs. Kaywoodie shoved the Bible into the fat woman's hands like she was handing the ball off for a quick double play. That Bible saved somebody's life, my ass!

The fat woman stared at the Bible.

"Is this brass?" she said.

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," Mrs. Kaywoodie said. "For three dollars it probably is brass."

"It looks so irreligious, you know. Of course I'm used to black leather," she said, giggling again. "But then I've never been in the service."

"Really?" Mrs. Kaywoodie said like she didn't believe her.

"—And the print is so absolutely weeny, you know. I'm sure that Hollister would find it maddening to follow." She turned to me. "Hollister is my son, you know." I nodded my head like I knew it all the time. "What do you think of this Bible, sonny?"

I can't stand being called "sonny," but I said, "It might save his

life, but if you ask me I doubt it. How could this thing stop a bullet?" I asked Mrs. Kaywoodie, waving the Bible in her face. "Impossible. Why a bullet would go through this like tissue paper."

They both looked at me. The fat woman looked scared.

"Oh my," she said. "I suppose you're right, you know, except that Hollister's in the Navy. The Navy is more protected from that sort of thing, isn't it, sonny?"

I told her I thought so.

"That's what I thought, you know."

She handed the Bible to me. Have it gift wrapped," she said, ignoring Mrs. Kaywoodie.

After I finished up with the fat woman, Mrs. Kaywoodie walked up to me.

"Seeing that you're so ambitious today for a change," she said, "you can wait on customers while I straighten out the file cards."

"They goddam well need it!" Mr. Cannon grumbled without looking up from the desk.

Mrs. Kaywoodie didn't pay any attention to him.

So I spent the rest of the afternoon selling books. I sold a lot of them. It's a good thing *I* like to sell books and wait on people because nobody else does. My father would rather hide behind his desk than say "Can I help you?" to somebody, and Mr. Cannon scares the hell out of everybody, and Mrs. Kaywoodie's above it all.

My old man came in at five o'clock and he looked rotten. He'd been drinking and he had a big spot of liquor on his tweed sport jacket. He told Mrs. Kaywoodie to get out on the floor, and he called me into the back room. When Pooch saw my father he sat down in a chair with his back to us.

My old man lit a cigarette and his hand trembled as he held a match to the cigarette. He hardly ever smokes cigarettes.

"Sit down, Owen," he said.

I sat down and he leaned against the old roll-topped desk.

"I just called Detroit," he said.

"What for?"

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach.

"Well," he said, "I'm not satisfied. I want to know more about your mother's condition."

"What d'you mean?"

"I talked to a friend of mine, Owen. Pete Snyder—went to school with him. He specializes in internal disorders." He crushed out the cigarette. "He's coming down this week or early next week and have a look at your mother."

I could smell the dust from the secondhand books and the cigarette smoke in the air.

"It's too bad Paul isn't here," he said.

"What d'you mean by that, Dad?"

"Your mother and he are very close."

I heard Pooch cough; I didn't look over at him, though. My father lit another cigarette.

"D'you think there's anything bad the matter?"

He looked at me for a long time.

"Yes," he said, "I do."

I couldn't look at his face any more.

"What d'you think's wrong with her, Dad?"

"—You never can be sure, Owen. . . ."

"What's the matter with her, Dad?"

"I think your mother has cancer," he said.

When Pooch came over with a book a minute later, me and my old man were still looking at each other.

He told my father he was going to buy the book. He thought that would please him. My father's always kidded Pooch about how much time he spends browsing without buying anything. I told Pooch to take the book out to Mrs. Kaywoodie, and that he might as well walk on home alone because I had to stick around and take care of a few things.

Pooch finally saw that something was wrong, and then he left in a hurry.

My old man had nodded all the time Pooch was talking but I don't think he'd heard a word Pooch said.

He ground out the cigarette under his foot.

"Owen," he said, "I'm not brave any more. I think I'm all broken. I think the whole thing's broken me."

All I could do was sit there and tell him it wasn't true. That it just wasn't really true, that's all.

Then I got up from the chair and walked into the front of the store. Mr. Cannon had already gone home, and Mrs. Kaywoodie was standing by the door with her coat on, smiling at me.

6

The next night I went over to see Bill and he looked very surprised when he opened the door and saw me standing there.

"What the hell you up to, Harding?"

"Just thought I'd stop by and pay an old buddy a visit."

He was only half dressed. He had on a white shirt and red, white and blue striped shorts, and no pants or shoes. I had to walk in, because there wasn't any sense in waiting for him to ask me.

"Your folks home?" I said, spreading out on the davenport.

"Nope. They're out at the Country Club. And I'm getting ready to go out myself." He raised an eyebrow and looked at me sort of funny. "What're you up to, O.H.?"

"Oh, you know. This, that and the other thing."

He started fiddling around with himself, pretending he had an itch. He loves to do that.

I closed my eyes.

"You got a date tonight, Bill?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'm not sure. Why?"

"There's a dance at school," I said. "I thought maybe we could go stag. If we could pick up a couple of girls we could take them to my house. My old man's not home."

"How's your mother?" he said.

I was getting to hate it when people asked me that all the time, but it didn't matter so much with Bill. He didn't really care one way or the other anyway.

"Coming along fine," I said.

"That's good," he said. He yawned. "Listen, O.H., I'm in a mad rush. If you want to talk to me come on upstairs. I gotta wash up. It's damn cold down here anyway."

I followed him upstairs. I sat on the edge of the bathtub and watched him admire himself in the mirror. For a while I thought he'd hypnotized himself, and then he plastered his hair with water and started combing the water back out in the sink.

"How about it?" I said.

"How about what?" he said.

"Coming out with me tonight."

"Sorry, boy, I'm all tied up."

"Anything special on?"

"Oh, you know," he said, admiring his teeth. "A little loving. Maybe a movie. It's gotta be a cheap date, though. I'm low as hell on money."

"That's rough," I said. I turned on the hot water in the bathtub and got it so scalding I couldn't hold my hand under very long. I burned the hell out of my hand.

I noticed that Bill was looking at me through the mirror.

"Say, O.H., you wanta do me a big favor?"

"I don't know," I said. "What?"

"Let me wear that tie you got on. Just tonight. It'll go great with my gray suit."

I hoisted myself out of the bathtub that I'd sunk down into, and stood up.

"I'll tell you what, Bill, I'll make a deal with you. You tell me where you're going tonight, and who with, and you can have the tie."

"You mean you'll give it to me?"

"Sure."

I hated to part with the tie; it was a good-looking brown and black striped job, but I wanted to find out who he was going out with. Bill frowned while he thought it over. He always frowned when he tried to think about something. When he said "That's a deal," I ripped off the tie.

He was gluing down his hair with about a half a bottle of Vaseline Hair Tonic. Then he smiled at himself three or four times, and worked a little curl into his hair with his fingers.

"Be a buddy and hand me that towel, will you?"

I handed him the towel and waited for a while.

"Come on, Romeo, quit admiring yourself. Who's your date? Mary Zeller?"

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't be seen dead with that cow. Not *this* boy."

I followed him into his room where he took twenty minutes to put on his pants.

"Mary's damn good-looking," I said. "Most guys would love to go out with her. And she's really a wonderful dancer, besides being smarter than all hell. My God, Bill, she's just your speed!"

"She's not my type," he said. "You just give me the word and I'll fix you up with her."

Bill's cuff links were laying on the bed and just when he looked around for them, I took one and stuck it in my mouth. When he reached for them I stuck my tongue out at him, and the cuff link was right on the tip of my tongue. You should have seen his face.

"Come on, give it to me," he said. "You're always such a goddam kid about everything."

"You can have it when you tell me where you're going and who with." I had a hard time talking with the cuff link in my mouth.

He shrugged his shoulders, and gave me one of his dazzling, handsome smiles.

"Just a girl," he said.

"That's news," I said. "What's her name?"

"You've prob'ly seen her around, O.H. Barby Alslinger.

"I've seen her around," I said, spitting out the cuff link. "Where you taking her?"

"Clean the goddam cuff link off, Harding."

"You going to the dance?"

"Nope," he said. "Haven't decided yet. I'll prob'ly take her for a spin someplace. Maybe out by the river."

He dabbed some powder on his face.

"Going to try and get a little something, eh?"

"Maybe," he said, grinning stupidly. "And then maybe not. Who knows what the future may bring."

"That's profound, Bill. I'll have to remember that."

I got off the bed and zipped up my jacket.

"Well," I said, "so long, Bill. Have a hell of a good time, will you? For me?"

"Don't lose any sleep over big Bill," he said. "I'll make out all right."

"I know you will, Bill."

"Gimme a call tomorrow. Maybe we can throw a football around or something."

"You don't have to come down with me," I said. "I can find my way out."

And I took off.

I was a little worried that his garage door would be locked but it wasn't. I don't know much about car motors, but Paul had a Model A once, so I know enough to keep a car from running. I lifted up the hood and searched around in the dark until I found the spark plugs. Then I took the connections off three of them, and jimmied a few other deals around until the car wouldn't run on a bet. After that I put the hood back down as softly as I could, and thought about what a bastardly thing I was doing.

And then I ran home as fast as I could, laughing my head off all the way.

On Monday at lunch Bill told me and Pooch and Herby and Deacon what rotten luck he'd had on Saturday night. He had to break his date because the Buick wouldn't start. We all told him how sorry we were. He said he called up Barbara at nine o'clock to break the date. The way Bill told it, he was very P Od because she didn't bawl all over the place when he said he couldn't make the car start. You could tell.

"Why didn't you take her anyway?" Herby asked him.

"Yeah. Sure thing. Walk her through the snow with her goddam evening gown dragging on the ground."

"You should've called a taxi," Pooch said.

"Sure, Bill, why didn't you do that?" asked Deacon.

"That's what you should've done, Bill," I said.

We all looked at him.

"Well, she didn't ask me to do that," he said.

"You mean you were waiting for her to ask you?" Herby said.

We were all grinning at Bill, and I guess even he realized what an idiot he sounded like.

"Oh, I gotta tell you the most important thing. I got all greasy screwing around with the car. I got my pants and shirt and everything else greasy," he said. "That's no lie."

The hell it wasn't!

After lunch I smoked a cigarette in the can with Pooch. That's the worst thing you can do at Cornell. They almost throw you in prison for it. As soon as me and Pooch found out how dangerous it was we started doing it all the time. We walked into the can about a half a minute apart—the can right across from the principal's office. While Pooch was lighting the cigarettes I jumped over to the window and opened it. Then we hung our heads out the window and puffed like crazy. The practice football field behind the school was covered with snow. Pooch pointed out at the field and said that next fall he'd be playing out there on the big Reds. I didn't say anything. Then he took our cigarettes and leaned way the hell out the window and stuck them in a snow bank.

"No smoking for me next year," he said. "I'll be in training."

"At least you know what you'll be doing next year."

"What d'you mean, Owen?"

"Just what I said. You know what you'll be doing next year. That's something to look forward to."

Pooch put his arm on my shoulder.

"Don't let it worry you too much," he said.

"It does, though, Pooch. I can't help worrying."

"When's that guy coming in from Detroit to look at your mother?"

"He was supposed to come this week. I could kill him. Now because of the holidays he says he can't come until the middle of January. What a goddam prince! By that time anything could happen."

I borrowed Pooch's comb and combed my hair.

The last bell rang.

"So long," Pooch said, "see you after school." He took off without his comb.

I wondered if Pooch had gotten embarrassed, the way he ran off like that. It was getting so I couldn't talk to anybody about it any more. I might lose my friends. I might lose my mind. I just didn't seem to know what to do.

I slipped into Miss Reynold's dungeon just as she started to close the door. She said I was late again, but I didn't stop to shoot the breeze with her about it. I walked to my seat in the back of the room.

As I sat down Al Mirowsky, who slept next to me, leaned down like he'd dropped his pencil and said, "Owen, what's the lesson today? Is it on Emerson?"

I leaned down like I'd dropped my pencil too, and told Al we'd finished with Emerson two weeks ago while he was tattooing his initials all over his arms with my pen.

"What is the lesson? Quick. I think she's looking at us."

"It's on *Thanatopsis*, Al."

"What's that, a poem?"

"That's what they call it," I said. "It's on death and it stinks. I can't remember anything about it. Hey, sit up before we get kicked out of here."

We both sat up as Miss Reynolds picked up her roster from the desk and started screaming out our names.

She began class by talking about Bryant's home life, and what a genius he was, and about ten minutes later she was talking about politics. She loves to talk about Roosevelt. She hates him. She was very P Od because Roosevelt had won again in November. She could be very boring sometimes—I'd rather hear about Bryant's home life and what a genius he was. Usually she didn't bother anybody in class when she tried to snow us under about politics, but lately she'd gotten so crazy and bitter that it was pretty embarrassing.

She began waving her arms around and spitting all over everybody in the front row. She said that only a dictator would run

four times for president, and that Roosevelt was just as big a snake-in-the-grass as John L. Lewis and Hitler, and then she threw in Hepplemen, who was Fleming's Democratic mayor a few years back. I thought of how my old man would blow up if he heard her talk like that; according to him he's the only Democrat in our family all the way back to when we got our independence, and he takes a lot of pride in that fact. Miss Reynolds was really going crazy, the longer she talked. She said we shouldn't be fighting the war, but if we *had* to fight the war we should be on Germany's side against Russia.

"The Germans wouldn't give us a chance, would they?" Dorothy Hurd asked. She was the smartest girl in class.

"Chance?" Miss Reynolds shouted. "We didn't even try to find out!"

"I don't believe that's true," Wayne Doxstader said. "Look at England—they tried to settle peacefully with Germany. Look what happened to them. We knew exactly what to expect from the Germans." Wayne was very clever, too. He always got A's in everything.

The class was getting restless and noisy.

"The only reason we're fighting Germany," shouted Miss Reynolds, "is because Washington's full of Reds. I think the *Detroit Times* makes that perfectly clear. Why, when John L. Lewis called that terrible strike this year, troops should've marched in immediately and stopped that nonsense. But was that done? Of course not! And why? Simply because Mr. Roosevelt believed in the strike—regardless of what he might have said publicly. He didn't care whether the American people were cold, or whether this country lost the war, or not. He's a New Dealer, and I wouldn't be at *all* surprised if the New Dealers are paid directly from Moscow!"

She kept going on and on, and sometimes Herman or Wayne or Dorothy or somebody else would try to interrupt, but the old fool was really wound up. God, was she stupid! Finally when she wasn't looking I grabbed the ink pot from Al's desk and pulled out the cork and made a box mustache on my upper lip. Then I leaned

down in back of the girl in front of me, and combed my hair down over my right eye, which was easy because I hadn't had a haircut in over two months. Then I waited. I waited until Miss Reynolds stopped to gasp for breath. And then I stood up and clicked my heels together and did the Nazi salute.

"*Heil Hitler!*" I screamed. I tried to make it sound very German and throaty. The class screamed like crazy. You couldn't hear anything for at least a minute except laughter, and Al and a few others clapping their hands together. "*Heil Germany, Heil Italy, Heil Japan!*" I yelled as loud as I could, and then I sat down.

When the bell rang at two o'clock Miss Reynolds made me stay at my desk.

"Owen Harding," she shouted, from the front of the room to where I was sitting in the back. "Owen, I could have you suspended from school for this!"

I didn't say anything.

"But I shall consider it a childish prank. Report to me here at three-thirty."

"I'm working at my father's store," I said.

"That's unfortunate," she said. "You might've thought of that before."

At three-thirty I reported to her, and she made me write the same stupid sentence on the board five hundred times. I thought my hand would fall off.

The sentence was:

I'm Owen Harrison Harding, and I've been very impolite.

I'm Owen Harrison Harding, and I've been very impolite.

I'm Owen Harrison Harding, and I've been very impolite.

I thought I'd go out of my mind before I finished. When I was finally through it was nearly four-thirty, and Miss Reynolds already had on her hat and coat. She didn't count the number of sentences on the board, because she was very anxious to get out of there. There were only four hundred and twenty-five sentences on the board.

We walked out into the hall together.

"Miss Reynolds," I said, "I wasn't being impolite. I meant what

I did in class. I really meant it, and it wasn't any childish prank either. I don't think you have the right to tell us about your politics."

"Why, Owen Hard——"

"And if you talk about your politics again, Miss Reynolds, I'll do what *I* did again. I mean it!"

She was so mad she was speechless. Her mouth was opening and closing all over the place. When I stopped at my locker she walked away from me and went out the door without saying anything.

I felt great. I might have taken a chance doing what I did, but I hadn't felt so great in a long long time, and I whistled and sang out loud all the way down to the store.

7

On Christmas Eve there were kids singing carols down all the streets. The carols and the bells ringing and all the church bells chiming didn't go with the weather outside. It should have snowed. It had gotten so warm out it was raining.

The kids came caroling by our house. I was wrapping the two packages for my father, and Pooch was helping me out by drinking the Tom and Jerrys my old man had made before he left for the hospital. I couldn't go to the hospital with him because my mother had been very sick all day and the night before, and the nurses told him he could stay only for a minute. He could just stay long enough to give her the presents from both of us, and then he would have to come right home again.

"Hold your finger here, will you Pooch?"

The singing got very loud in front of our house and then got softer and softer again.

I liked the singing; they sang:

"Joy to the wo-orld,"

and

"Oh come, all ye faithful"

and

"Oh little town of Bethlehem——"

After I finished wrapping the packages I opened the front door. We'd smoked about thirty cigarettes since dinner, and the smoke was so thick in the living room you could cut it with a knife. We had all the tobacco because I'd given Pooch a whole sack of it for Christmas. I'd been emptying the cigar and pipe and cigarette tobacco out of our ash trays since September, and I'd sorted out all the burnt tobacco and kept only the good part. You should have seen how happy Pooch was to get it. He said it was the best present he had gotten. He gave me a nice knife that had a nail clipper and a nail file on it. It was a swell knife. Actually Pooch's present was from my father too, because it was his tobacco, and even though he didn't know he was helping me give Pooch a present I didn't think he'd mind.

The rain had stopped as quick as it started. You could almost feel it getting colder. It would snow again pretty soon, maybe before Christmas came. Outside the sky was clearing again, and the stars began popping out all over. People were leaving for church. You could hear them starting their cars. A few kids walked by outside. They were laughing and carrying packages probably presents. I closed the door then.

"Where d'you think Bill is tonight?" I asked Pooch.

"I don't know."

We listened to the sound of the church bells for a while. The Tom and Jerrys made everything seem better. My mother would get better and next year would be fine. I drank three or four Tom and Jerrys, one right after another. They were sweet and warm, and made me know for sure that she would get well very soon and that next year would be a wonderful year. Maybe even the war would be over next year, and Paul would come home.

"I know where he went," I said.

"Where who went?"

"Bill," I said. "He took Barbara out to the Armory."

"Oh, to hell with her."

"Why d'you suppose he took her, Pooch? She's not his type. She's smart. She'll probably bore the hell out of him—he'll bore

her, too. Bill has to neck with every girl he takes out, and she won't let him."

"Sure she'll let him. They all let you."

"That's not true, Pooch. Honestly."

Pooch poured another drink into his cup.

"Barbara Alslinger's a stupid girl," he said. "Quit mooning over her, Owen. Don't be a dope. She doesn't even know you're alive."

I was getting a little lightheaded.

"What d'you suppose he'll do, Pooch?"

"Why, what he can get away with! What you or I would do, or anybody else that had a chance."

"I don't think you'd touch her if you didn't like her. Would you, Pooch?"

I didn't believe he would.

"You're damn right. I'd have myself a ball."

"Why?"

"Because she's like all girls. They have to ruin everything. She'll make a dope out of you before she's through. She'll make a stupid ass out of you, Owen. I'll bet you anything."

"Sure," I said, "she might. I don't know. All I know is I like her. And I've never liked a girl before."

"You're really nuts."

"How do you know? You've never gone with a girl."

"I don't have to. I know what they're like."

"How d'you know if you've never gone with one?"

"You wouldnt believe me if I told you."

"Yes I would, Pooch. Come on. Tell me."

"Well, they're different than us."

I looked at Pooch for a while.

"That's what I mean," he said. "They think in a different way and everything. They're not like we are."

"Of course they're not," I said. "They're women."

He stood up.

"Let's have another drink," I said.

"No thanks," Pooch said.

He started toward the door.

"Hey, you're not going, are you?"

"I think I'll run on home," he said.

"I thought you were going to help me finish this bowl."

"I've had enough," he said.

"Don't you like them, Pooch?"

"They're all right," he said. "I've had plenty. I'm tired."

He sounded sort of angry about something.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked him.

"Everything's fine," he said. He opened the door.

"Take her slow Joe," he said.

"Will do. And you play her crazy Daisy."

"I guess I'll hit the bed Jed."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," I said.

"That gives me practically no leeway," Pooch said.

"You sure you don't want another drink, Pooch?"

"I'm drunk," said Pooch. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'm drunk too."

"I'm drunk worse than you are."

"Well," I said, "undrink yourself, buster. I'll call you tomorrow."

After Pooch said he'd call me because I always forgot to call him he walked out the door and slammed it. I lay down on the davenport and the house was so quiet. The church bells weren't chiming any more; everybody was in church that was going, and the bells wouldn't chime again until around eleven for midnight services, and then the Catholic bells would ring out low and powerful and majestic, while the tinnier, higher sound that the Protestant church bells made would be ringing out too, and for a few minutes the sound that all the bells made together would be very peaceful. It was so quiet in the house I thought I could still hear the door slamming. I turned on the radio and listened to carols. My old man pulled in the driveway a few minutes later; I heard the car door shut with a bang, and his feet crunching on the snow as he walked up to the porch. I'd been lying there thinking about Pooch. I'd been worrying about him, although not for any clear reason. But he sure did worry me.

My old man drank most of a new bowl of Tom and Jerrys as we sat on the twin beds in his and my mother's room exchanging presents. I sat on her bed and he sat on his bed and there wasn't any Christmas tree. It felt like there were about ten people missing.

I gave him three pair of Argyle socks and a very sharp brown and black tie like the one I gave to Bill, and he gave me a pigskin wallet from some store in New York and a gold identification bracelet that I'd wanted for a long time. We were kind of embarrassed sitting there alone. We thanked each other, and then cleared away the boxes and paper and ribbon. We didn't talk very much. We sat on the beds for a while drinking Tom and Jerrys until I couldn't drink one more drop, and then we got up and went downstairs. Mom had my old man get me two new Harry James albums and a new Stan Kenton album for Christmas, and I put on some of the records and tried to explain to him what they were all about. He seemed just mildly interested, though. He was getting drunker.

He looked at the snow that was beginning to fall outside and kicked at the rug with his foot. He started talking about Paul. He lit a cigar and looked up at the ceiling; he seemed to be talking more to the ceiling than to me. He said that some nights he'd lie in bed until it was almost light outside thinking about Paul, and try to remember prayers he knew as a little kid and pray for Paul. Then he said he would have to realize that he couldn't remember any prayers all the way through, and he couldn't see Paul's face very clear either, and then he would have to spend the night trying to think about something else. He said he hadn't slept very well since mom got sick the first time and Paul went away.

Then he said there were other nights when he didn't think about my mother or Paul at all, and he would try to remember what it was like being a kid. He would try to get back that feeling that a kid has who's been playing out in the cold all day and then comes inside to go to bed, all worked up and sweaty and tired out, and tries to find that one cool spot on the pillow, and keeps turning the pillow around and around. He said remembering things like that

was a good sensation. And he said there were other nights when my mother was very bad and he'd been drinking a lot, and on those nights he lie in bed trying to remember the names of all the states and all the capital cities, and sometimes even the streets in Fleming, and maybe after that he'd go to sleep when the sun was coming up.

He kept saying how much he wished Paul would come home for mother's sake, and about half the time he was saying this he was calling him Owen and calling me Paul. And then he started saying how him and Paul never got along very well, but if Paul was home now he was sure they'd hit it off a lot better. He was getting sad talking about Paul so much. I don't know why talking about Paul should make him sad, because Paul's very witty and my old man is, too. But when they're together I guess they're both pretty sad.

After a couple of more drinks, he told me this story about when he was young and living in New York. I was very interested because he almost never tells you what happened to him when he was young. You'd think sometimes that he never *had* been young. He said that when he was living in New York he felt he could conquer the world, and that he'd go months without writing my grandparents. He said a lot of people were like that in 1920.

He was getting his degree at Columbia. When he had the time he would walk along the streets of New York and dream. He said he had millions of dreams, and none of them seemed impossible to him then. The one thing that bothered him, he couldn't understand how my grandfather could stay cooped up in a small town in the Midwest, even if he was happy and successful.

He said my grandfather wrote him all the time about coming home and going into a partnership with him. My grandfather owned two big jewelry stores. My father said that nobody thought of living in the Midwest any more, and that any place west of the Hudson was deadlier than hell. He thought that everybody in Fleming was still living in the Victorian Age, and his family especially, and that back there if you kissed a girl once you were engaged. He said he didn't even answer my grandfather's letters about going into the business.

He got engaged to a poet who lived in Greenwich Village. He said she was a very good poet, and she used to read her stuff out loud to him. She'd had some of her poetry published, and already had a fairly large following. She wrote sonnets mostly. He said that one time he went to New England with her, near Cape Cod I think, to meet her mother, and he said that after spending three days with her mother and three sisters he figured out she was crazy. She was a secret drinker, and cried a lot at night.

He said after he broke up with her he began writing to my mother. They had gone through school together, which struck me as very dull but I didn't say anything. He said he wrote her only to please my grandmother, who was anxious as all hell that he marry some Midwestern, Episcopalian girl.

Then he got very sick. He got pneumonia in the summer so bad that the doctors thought he would die. He said the doctors wrote my grandfather a letter saying, "You'd better hurry if you want to see your son alive." So my grandfather got a friend of his to fly him out in one of those old one-wing jobs, and he got to New York the same day.

He sat with my father through two days and two nights until he passed the crisis. And then he moved in with my father and nursed him until he got well. When he got well the two of them went out on the town and had a real ball. They spent all the money they both had with them, and they didn't go back to Fleming for nearly two months, and by then my old man was through with New York. He only went back there to live long enough to get his degree. He said that it took something like pneumonia to bring him and my grandfather together, and that they'd never been such close friends before.

So he married my mother as fast as he could and went into my grandfather's business, and stayed in it until he had to sell out in 1929—a year after my grandfather died.

My old man picked up the bowl and tipped it up to his mouth to drink the last of the Tom and Jerry, and most of it slopped all over his vest. He wiped off his mouth and put the bowl on the floor.

And then he laughed.

"Well, Owen," he said, "that was the portrait of your old man as a young man."

I smiled stupidly.

We sat without saying anything for a while.

The church bells began chiming again; it was just eleven o'clock. The time had slipped by fast, and I was dead-tired. I tried to keep from yawning, but I really felt knocked out.

"Were you ever sorry, Dad?"

"Sorry?"

"About coming back here to live. I mean you felt it was such a drag."

He chewed on his cigar. For a minute I wasn't sure he'd heard me.

"Sorry, old man? I don't know. Yes—I suppose I was sorry, but not resentful. If I had been a stronger man I would've done better in life. I've coped with life to the best of my ability, that's all. That's all any man can hope to do. I was no poet, no Midas—I was just what I am." He smiled and crushed out his cigar in the ash tray. "I can't say honestly that I've regretted anything."

I could tell he didn't want to talk any more. He kept looking at the clock. He wasn't really talking to me any more—just sort of waiting around.

"You going out, dad?"

"For a while, I guess."

"It's liable to get icy. You going to drive?"

"I think I'll walk, Owen."

"That's best on a night like this. It's liable to freeze over."

"It may."

"You going any place special?"

"Perhaps I'll walk over to the City Club."

"Well, don't drink too much."

He put on his coat.

"Are you staying in?"

"I'm going to bed."

"You're smarter than I am," he said.

"I'm pretty tired."

We walked to the door together.

"We probably should have gone to church," he said.

"Probably."

"But I guess it's too late, isn't it?"

"I think it is."

"I think we should have gone, though."

I didn't say anything. We didn't look at each other. Then he put his arm on my shoulder.

"Owen," he said, "merry Christmas, Owen." And he kissed me on the cheek.

Then he hugged me.

"Merry Christmas, Dad."

He opened the door and it was snowing harder outside. The wind was blowing the snow at such a slant it didn't seem like it would ever land. The kids weren't singing carols any more.

"I'll go to the Lions Club. It's closer."

"It's only ten blocks, I think."

"It's twelve," he said. "Two blocks past the store."

"That's right."

"Owen—I'm sorry we didn't go to church."

"There's no use thinking about it now. It's too late."

"Well, good night, old man."

"So long, Dad. See you tomorrow."

I breathed in some cold fresh air and watched him walk down to the corner. Then I closed the door. I rubbed my cheek and smiled, not because I felt so happy, but out of silliness or maybe because I was nervous. That was the first time my father had done something like that in at least five years.

8

I turned off all the lights and started upstairs to bed when the doorbell rang. Before I got to the door whoever it was was trying to bang the goddam thing down. At first I thought of calling the police. It might be a maniac. My nerves were bad lately, being alone so much, and I'd been hearing a million strange noises around the house. Then I got a hold of myself. Probably my

father had forgot his key or his wallet, and there wasn't anything to worry about. I went to the door and pulled back the curtain and looked outside. It was Deacon and he was crying! I opened the door and he came charging in and the big character was bawling his head off. I looked outside. His car was parked by the curb with the motor running, and I thought I could see somebody behind the wheel. I slammed the door, and then just for the hell of it I locked it.

"What's wrong?" I said. "What's the matter, Deacon?"

He was sprawled out on the davenport with his face buried. At first I thought he was drunk, but I couldn't smell anything.

"That filthy bastard!" he shouted. "That no-good goddam two-bit moron. I hate him. I really hate him! Some day his luck'll run out, and the son of a bitch'll get his throat cut in a dark alley."

"Who will? Who're you talking about?"

He was still crying. He was so mad and nervous he could hardly talk. I thought maybe I was going crazy and Deacon wasn't even there and it was all one bad dream—that's how bad it was.

He sat up. He was sweating.

"Your father's out, isn't he?"

"He's out. I don't know——"

"Listen—Butler pulled the dirtiest trick anybody can pull. I mean it. He has to get the treatment. We'll give it to him right now."

"Take it easy, Deacon. Calm down. Hold on a second, I'll get out a glass of water. Just hold on."

When I came back from the kitchen I asked him what happened. He didn't touch the water.

"Evelyn," he said. That's all he could say for a while. He said it about ten times. Evelyn is Deacon's double first cousin. His father and his father's brother married his mother and her sister. "He's been saying all kinds of things about Evelyn and me. He said—oh, I can't say it! I really hate his guts."

"Come on, Deacon, tell me what happened. What'd the moron say?"

"I never thought about killing anybody, Doctor, but I know I

could Bill. I don't know. I *feel* like I could. That's awful to say, but he's a rotten bastard. Boy, I hate his guts!"

"Now just take it easy, Deacon. You'll have a hemorrhage if you don't calm down."

His face was so white it scared me. His eyes were redder than hell; his nose was even red. I drank the water.

"He said I screw around with Evelyn. You know. I don't have to go into a lot of stupid details. You know how Butler thinks. His mind's always in the gutter. We've got to give him the treat——"

"Where did all this happen, at the Armory?"

"He said how can the two of us sleep in the same bed without anything happening. And he went on, the stupid bastard. We've never slept together, O.H. Not since we were eight or nine anyway."

He was shaking. He kept cracking his knuckles until I thought I'd go crazy.

"Wasn't he with Barbara Alslinger tonight?"

"That's what started it all. He was drunk. He showed up with her around nine, and after a while he was getting drinks from everybody and he got drunk. She was disgusted. You could tell. He kept trying to kiss her on the dance floor and finally she went home with Tubb's sister. Then he *really* got drunk. Give me that water."

"I drank it."

"So then he started——"

"I'll get some more, hold on a second."

I got us both a tall glass of water.

"So then what happened?" I asked him.

"He danced a couple of sets with Evelyn. She likes him, you know. That's what I can't see. What do girls see in him, anyway?"

I couldn't help smiling at that, even though I didn't want to. I just couldn't help it. Deacon had sure changed his mind fast about Bill. He used to think Bill was the greatest guy going.

"That was okay. I didn't care if he danced with her. But then he started feeling her up. Right out there on the goddam dance floor! Right in front of everybody! And the thing that really got me mad

was that Evelyn didn't seem to care. She didn't care if everybody in Fleming was watching. You drinking your water?"

"No, take it."

"Thanks. So then I walked up to them and yanked her away by the arm. I called her some pretty bad names I guess. There were some older guys there—some guys from college, and they got a large charge out of it. Well, Bill got royally P Od and got me outside as I was leaving. 'Evelyn's going home with me,' he said. 'Like hell she is,' I said. Then he said, 'I'm gonna give her a good time like you do in secret. Why should you keep it all to yourself?' That's just what he said, O.H. I smacked him as hard as I could. I hurt him, too. He sat on the steps, rubbing his jaw. And I found out he's a big coward because he didn't even try and hit me back. He started telling everybody about Evelyn and me. He sat on the steps shouting. He didn't shut up until Evelyn slapped his face. Just think—he said all that stuff with her *there* all the time! I tell you the dumb bastard deserves the treatment."

"He didn't even try and hit you back?" That really amused me.

"Oh, you know him. He talked his way out of that. When I was getting in the car he drove by me and yelled that he'd arrange a fight between you and me, because we were both cowards and weaklings."

"Put up your dukes," I said, "and let's get it over with." I struck a John L. Sullivan pose.

"Come on, Doctor. I'm not in any mood for fooling around. Anyway, guess what happened then? Go on, guess."

"He——"

"He played crinkle fenders with some Chevvy on Michigan and got in a wreck. He didn't get hurt, but the grill's all smashed up. Don't you think he deserved that?"

"I——"

"You're goddam right he did! It's too bad he had his car instead of his folks'. And now he's got the treatment coming to him."

He ran into the dining room. He leafed through the yellow pages of the phone book until he found the number of a liquor

store. He started to make the call and I clapped the receiver down on the hook.

"Let's talk about this a second," I said. "Don't you think getting in a wreck's enough? How much revenge d'you need anyway?"

"All I can get," he said.

A horn was honking outside.

"Who's out in the car?"

"Slim."

"Shall I tell him to come in?"

"No, he's drunk. Leave him alone. Get me some more water, will you, O.H.?"

"Your goddam obedient servant," I said.

When I came back he'd dialed the H and H liquor store. He had a handkerchief over the talking end of the phone to make his voice sound lower.

"Hello?" he said. "This is the Butler residence. William I. Butler speaking. *Butler!*" he shouted. The guy seemed to be deaf. I wasn't too worried about getting caught because I knew the telephone company couldn't check our number. We'd given the treatment to a few idiots from Patterson when I was in junior high school. "Listen," Deacon said, "would you please deliver a case of —of champagne to 500 West Park Drive?"

I could hear the guy asking Deacon what kind. Deacon asked me what kind and I said Schlitz.

"That's beer, you dope."

"I know it," I said. "Champagne costs about fifty dollars a case. Tell him you want a case of beer."

Deacon took his hand off the talking end of the phone and began talking to the guy again. "Make that four cases of Schlitz instead," he said. "Okay—you got it? What? *B-u-t-l-e-r. E* as in engine—*r* as in revenge. 500 West Park Drive. Fine. Thanks a million." And he hung up.

"*R* as in revenge," he said, with a big smile on his face.

"You feeling better now?" I asked him.

"I'll say I do. I feel so good maybe I'll do it again tomorrow night."

"Not on my phone you won't."

"Hey, all that water made me hungry. You got any stuff in the Frigidaire?"

"Oh God!" I said. "Go on home. Leave me alone. I'm going to bed."

"Thanks for letting me use your phone, O.H., thanks a lot. I thought you wouldn't mind, knowing how much you love Bill."

"Don't mention it," I said.

"By tomorrow night," Deacon said, "Bill will have his ass in a sling." He started picking his nose.

"Just forget where you made the call."

"Well, good night, Doctor. Thanks again."

"Merry Christmas," I said. "I'll see you around."

After I let Deacon out I checked to see what time it was. It was exactly midnight. I didn't feel sleepy any more. I didn't feel too good either about Deacon sending that beer to Bill's house, not so much because Bill was a great guy, but I always wondered about Deacon and his cousin Evelyn myself. We went to Flint on a hayride in a storm one night last year, and Deacon and Evelyn were sitting in the back of the wagon buried in blankets. I was in a playful mood so I ripped the blankets off their heads and they were kissing each other, and I threw the blankets back over them and walked back to the front of the wagon and tried to make time with Mary Zeller, which was the stupidest thing I ever tried to do in my life. I must have been out of my head. At the time she was going with Jim Gilmore, who was only about two feet away talking to Randy Polk, and Jim is first-string fullback on the big Reds and really built, but all I could think about was Deacon kissing Evelyn under the blankets, and I didn't care what happened. After that night I always got mad when anybody kidded around about Deacon and Evelyn, and I couldn't stand to hear about it. I just wished that Deacon had used somebody else's phone to get back at Bill on, that's all.

Even though it was midnight I decided to call up Barbara. I don't know why I felt I had to call her all of a sudden, but something made me do it. I wasn't sleepy any more. I had never called

her before, but if thinking about calling somebody is calling somebody I hadn't been off the phone for the last three weeks.

I dialed the number, 2-9897, and I wanted to hang up after every ring but that seemed pretty cowardly, so I decided to let it ring six times and at the end of the fifth ring Barbara answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Is Barbara there?" I said as if I didn't know.

"This is she."

"Well, this is Owen Harding."

"Oh, How are you?"

"I'm sorry I called so late."

"Oh, that's all right," she said. "I was reading."

Boy, am I glad she said that! I hadn't been able to think of one thing to talk about.

"What're you reading?" I asked her.

"You'll probably laugh at me," she said, laughing. "You'll think I'm in my second childhood already. I'm reading *Wind in the Willows*. You know—the toad and his automobile and everything."

"I remember it," I said.

"I've read it once a year since my mother first read it to me."

"You must really like it."

"It's really my cup of tea," she said.

She told me all about the book which took about five minutes. I wasn't listening because I knew all about the book. I spent those five minutes trying to think of something to say when she didn't have anything to say any more. I was really up a goddam tree.

"—Have you read *This Side of Paradise*?" she asked me. After I said I hadn't she started raving about this one girl in the book, who the hero meets down in Maryland, by the name of Eleanor.

Whenever Barbara would stop to take a breath, I'd say "That sounds interesting" or "That part sounds very interesting," but actually the book sounded kind of silly and strange. What happens in the book is, the hero meets Eleanor down South and they walk through the fields together at night and read poetry to each other. Then one night Eleanor tries to ride her horse over a cliff, but at

the last minute she jumps off the horse and the horse goes over the cliff and dies. And then the hero and Eleanor start reading poetry to each other again! Really strange.

"Do you like poetry?" I said.

"Oh yes," she said, "very much. Rupert Brooke is my favorite poet. Everything he writes is beautiful and simple and very poetic."

"Do you have any favorite of his?" I asked her.

"I love all of his poetry," she said, "but if you'd like, I'll recite one of his that I know by heart. It's called *The Dead*. Just listen to these lines, kid; they're very lyrical:

"These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,
Washed marvellously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
And sunset, and the colours of the earth.
These had seen movement, and heard music; known
Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;
Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;
Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.
There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
And lit by the rich skies all day. And after,
Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
A width, a shining peace, under the night."

When she stopped we were quiet for a minute. I didn't know what to say. She read it slowly and very beautifully, like the whole thing had happened to her. I never did understand poetry when I had to read it in school, but the way she read it, it was easy.

"Isn't that good?" she said. "I don't know how anybody can help but love him. He's so sensitive and lyrical, and so full of all kinds of love. Love of the sea and the sand and beauty—he died young, you know."

I said I didn't know, but I said that she really knew how to read poetry. She asked me who my favorite poet was.

"Well," I said, "that's hard to say. I haven't read too much

poetry. I guess I like limericks as well as anything else." As soon as I said that I wished I hadn't. I really wished I hadn't.

"They're all right," she said, "only they're really just nonsense poems. I don't think I'm too keen on them."

"They are a lot of nonsense," I said.

"But they can be very funny. I think an awfully funny limerick is better any day than a long-winded, dreary poem. D'you know any limericks?"

"You mean by heart?"

"Yes. I'd love to hear one."

"Gosh, I'm sorry. I can't think of any right offhand." I was lying. I could think of plenty of them, but they were all dirty ones. I knew all those about the man and the woman from Nantucket, and I knew a real wild one about a girl named Alice who gets blown all to hell with a dynamite stick.

"Bill knows a lot of them," I said. Bill has the memory of a flea, and he's doubtless the last guy in the world who could remember a line of anything—even dirty poetry. But it was a clever way of getting her to talk about Bill. "Next time you see him ask him to rattle off a few."

"D'you mean Bill Butler?"

"Yes. He has a list of limericks a mile long."

"I'll bet they're all dirty ones," she said.

"Well, ask him. You'll have to ask him, Barb."

"All right, I shall. Next time I see him."

"You mean on New Year's Eve?" I said, trying to sound very casual.

"Yes. But how do you know? He asked me just this evening."

"He called me up," I said.

She didn't say anything.

"Another friend of mine called me tonight. Deacon Boverman," I said. I didn't know why I had to lie about that too. That's the biggest trouble with lying; once you start doing it, it gets very interesting like a game. "Deacon said you left the dance with Herby Tubbs's sister, and that Bill got nasty with his cousin, Evelyn. Bill is a very wild guy."

"Is he really?"

"He sure is. He's always in some kind of trouble." I told her a couple of the worst stories about Bill I knew. I would've told her about the time he cheated me at pool, except I didn't want her to know he beat me up. "I don't imagine you like wild guys like that—do you?"

"No, I don't. But I didn't have any idea he was a dunce—except for constantly talking about himself and football. Every time I've been with him he's been well-mannered. I left with Mary tonight because I was tired, not because of anything he did. And, really, he was very sweet about it."

"You mean he wasn't drunk?"

"Why no!" she said. She really sounded surprised. That idiot Deacon had exaggerated. I could see it all now. Bill didn't start screwing around and getting drunk until after she left the dance, and then he went after Evelyn that way because he thought Barbara had walked out on him. And the reason he called her up so fast and asked her to the New Year's dance was because the dumb, conceited idiot was sure she didn't like him. Guys like Bill always like girls who don't like them.

"He's a swell guy," I said. I didn't feel like talking any more.

We started having long silences where neither of us said anything and I was getting nervous.

"Say," Barbara said, "it's getting late. I have to be up early tomorrow."

"What time is it anyway?"

"Twelve-thirty. Twelve thirty-two."

"My gosh, it is late, isn't it?"

"Daddy's driving me and my mother to Grand Rapids tomorrow morning. We have friends there with whom we always spend Christmas. Daddy loves to start out early. While it's still dark."

"It sounds like fun," I said.

"It isn't much fun," she said. She sounded bored.

"Well," I said, "merry Christmas, Barb."

"Merry Christmas to you," she said, "and a happy New Year."

But I couldn't let her go like that. Just one, two, three.

"Barb—Barbara, I'm not going to hold you up, but what you said earlier about Bill, about not being the type to like poetry and stuff—well, what I'm wondering is, do you always try and type people?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm not sure I know what you mean exactly."

"What I want to know is, what type do you think I am?" After I said that I almost hung up.

She must have really been thinking about it because she didn't answer for a long time. Or else she went to sleep for a minute.

"Well, kid, I don't know you very well. I'd say you're probably full of fun."

I laughed when she said that. I tried to laugh like Sydney Carton must have laughed at the end of *Tale of Two Cities*.

"You're wrong," I said. "I'm sad most of the time."

"I don't believe you."

"I am, though. You don't have any idea."

"That surprises me. What makes you sad?"

"I don't know. I know, but it's long and involved. I keep it all inside myself. You wouldn't be interested."

"But now I'm becoming interested."

"Oh, don't do that, Barb. You'd never be able to figure me out. Not even my parents have been able to do that."

"I don't believe you're really sad."

"Okay—I'm not sad then." I laughed very bitterly. "It's late, Barbara. Good night and merry Christmas."

"I'm glad you called me."

"I'm glad too."

"Will I see you at the dance?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Probably not, though. I don't go out much. Personally I hate crowds."

"Oh, do come to the dance. Please! We'll hate the crowd together."

"Maybe," I said. "I don't know yet. Maybe."

"—Well, a merry Christmas to you, anyhow."

"The same to you," I said, and then I hung up before she did.

You know, telling her what a sad guy I am really must have had an effect on me, because when I went to bed a few minutes later I felt sadder than hell. I lay there in bed and couldn't go to sleep. Since my mother had been sick and my father was away from home a lot, I'd been feeling pretty sad a lot of the time, but not like I felt that night as I lay in bed watching the snow fall past my window. I don't know whether telling Barbara what a sad guy I am had anything to do with it, but all I know is the longer I lay there, the sadder I got to feeling. I almost ended up crying!

9

The rest of that week went by so fast; it must have flown by because I can't remember any one thing happening that stands out in my mind, just a lot of jumbled-up trips to the hospital to see my mother, and two or three times trying to get my father to sober up, and him about half drunk during that week and hardly home at all.

On New Year's Eve I decided to go to the dance at the Country Club for a while. I had to take a taxi out because my father was away someplace with the jalopy or he could have driven me. It was no fun going out alone. There wasn't any girl I wanted to ask, though—Bill was taking Barbara, so I went by myself. I would have loved to go with one of the guys, but I couldn't do that. You see, your family has to belong to the Country Club or you can't play golf or go to dances out there. Pooch's old man used to belong before he got sent to prison, but now the only thing he belongs to is the stupid American Legion. Herby's folks never belonged, or probably even thought about it too much, because they're pretty poor. That's why when we were all kids Deacon and Bill never hung around with Herby; their parents weren't crazy about the idea, but I knew Herby since kindergarten and he was always my best friend except for Pooch. I told Deacon and Bill more than once that I wouldn't go anywhere without Herby, and pretty soon he was one of the crowd, but I don't really think that Bill ever did like Herby. And Deacon's father was blackballed from the Country Club two years ago for defending this Negro who was

supposed to have killed that white guy in the Detroit race riots. Deacon's old man got the Negro off, and a lot of people in Fleming hated his guts for that. To tell the truth, I don't think Deacon's father cares whether he belongs to the Country Club or not. He's a very busy lawyer, and he can't play golf, because his heart's not too good, and he's built like a bear and he says that bears shouldn't be allowed on dance floors, and he doesn't like talking to people anyway. All he really likes to do is work. He's a very serious guy.

I got out to the Country Club around ten-thirty, and then this thing that bothered me quite a bit happened. I got out of the cab and handed the driver a five-dollar bill. The fare had come to sixty cents and the guy gave me back four bills, a quarter, a dime and a nickel. So I gave the guy a fifteen-cent tip, and said "Happy New Year" or something. Well, I started to walk away and the guy shouted at me, and I started back to the cab, thinking maybe I'd left something inside. My head maybe. I'm always losing something. I was about three feet away when the driver said, "Here, fella, you seem to need the goddam money worse than I do," and he threw the fifteen cents out in the street. I couldn't see the money but I heard the coins clink when they hit the cement. And then, before he drove away, he stuck his head out of the window on my side and swore his ass off at me. After he drove away I just stood there for a while, not even moving I was so P Od. I was so P Od I didn't even look for the money; I just left it there. I guess the guy expected me to leave him a goddam inheritance just because it was New Year's, and a lot of people get drunk on New Year's and throw their money around very stupidly. I was so mad at that stupid idiot I just stood there shaking, but I felt awful in a way too, that he acted that way and that it bothered me as much as it did. Maybe the guy thought my father was rich as hell just because I was going to the Country Club. The whole thing bothered me quite a bit.

I didn't feel much like going inside after that, so I walked through the snow to the first tee, and stood there trying to see down the fairway, but it was too dark to see much of anything except the tall trees along the edges of the fairways, and once in a

while a dark hill or a valley where the course got kind of tricky. There wasn't a sound anywhere out there, except once in a while the faintest tinny sound from the Country Club where the dance band was playing; it was perfectly still and almost quiet, like the whole world had gone to sleep.

As I stood there I thought of that time over three years ago when my old man had decided to teach me how to play golf. It was on a sunny spring day, and I remember how happy we both were then, with nothing special on our minds, and there were plenty of sounds then, people hitting balls, and talking and laughing once they got away from the tee, and the birds singing in the trees, and when we got around on the other side of the course, coming in on the back nine, the sun was right in our eyes and the sky was almost red, and you could hardly tell where you hit the ball because there were long streaks of yellow light everywhere on the fairway, and the light on the fairway made the green grass so harsh it hurt your eyes, and I remember how happy we were when we finished playing and had a nice cold shower.

As soon as I got too cold I went inside. I didn't care to go inside at all for some reason, but I figured I might as well get warm. The band was playing "I Walk Alone," and I walked up to the bandstand and stood there watching the musicians. I always liked to watch the musicians playing for a dance because they seemed to have more fun than anybody else, and I always wanted them to like me. Sometimes I even lied and told them I played in a jazz band. Once I got in trouble doing that, because this one band asked me to sit in with them, and I had one hell of a time lying my way out of it. I think I told them I had a sore lip from blowing the old trumpet too much, and then I left in a hurry. These guys were all dressed alike; young-looking guys with crew-cuts, and they were all wearing those stupid Frank Sinatra bow ties. They were pretty good musicians, though. While they were playing "Don't Fence Me In," I saw Bill and Barb dancing. They danced very well together. After the song was over I walked up to their table. I tried to act even more bored than I felt, which wasn't too easy.

Bill was very excited about something; I thought maybe it was

about that beer Deacon sent to his house, but I found out later from Deacon that he'd changed his mind the next morning and canceled the order. Anyway, as I sat down Barbara looked as nervous as I felt.

"Boy, you should've seen your old man, O.H. Was he loaded! He got in a fight with some guy in the billiard room about the Germans—noisy as all hell."

I didn't look at Barbara. I took a long swallow of Bill's coke. My throat was very dry.

"I didn't know he was out here."

"Here! Boy, he was all over the place! I damn near fainted when they took him out of here. He'd had it for sure," Bill said. He finished his coke and ordered three more. He asked the waiter to lace them a little, and the waiter laughed a polite, flunky laugh. "My old man had to drive him home he was so drunk. You shoulda seen him swearing and everything. He said this stuff about his son being in the service and no son of a bitch had the right to say the Germans were any damn good."

Bill had the most stupid smile on his face I think I've ever seen. He really outdid himself. I still hadn't looked at Barbara, but I could feel her looking at me.

"Did he get hurt?" I said.

"Don't worry, O.H., he'll live. He got a black eye. The other guy's nose was bleeding. Listen—it's not wrong to get in a fight on New Year's Eve, so don't let it get you. Everybody gets loaded. Why even my old man got in a brawl out here one New Year's!"

I didn't know whether he was bragging, or trying to make me feel better in front of Barbara, or what. I think he was trying to be nice in his own way, though.

The band began playing "Twilight Time."

"May I have this dance?" I asked Barbara. That sounded very formal and stupid, but how else can you ask a girl to dance? If you say, "Are you dancing with somebody?" it sounds like you're not sure of yourself, and if you say, "Let's dance" it sounds sort of conceited, and if you say, "Who're you dancing with?" the girl has to be a genius to get what you mean. It didn't bother me too much

right then, though, because all I wanted to do was get away from Bill.

She was a good dancer. She could follow me, and she really had to be good to do that because I never knew what I was going to do next.

We were dancing the delphoi, which is a dance where you walk the girl around the dance floor, do a few deep knee bends and keep dipping your partner almost to the floor. You have to be in good shape to do it right; you almost have to be a football player or a weight lifter. I tried to dip her once and nearly dropped her on the floor. After that I stuck to the two-step and tried to make it look like five other things.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"What for?"

"The way Bill talked. It's embarrassing."

"Are you embarrassed?" I asked her.

"Well," she said, "I get all in a tizzy when a person talks like that."

"Don't let it bother you, Barb. It's okay."

"But you looked so shocked when Bill told you. I felt badly."

"It doesn't matter," I said.

After the song was over the band began playing "I'll Get By" without a break, so we kept dancing. There was one of those revolving bulbs on the ceiling covered with strips of colored tinsel, and as we danced everything changed color, first red, then yellow, and then purple and green and white. She looked very nice in all the colors. I held her just a little tighter as we danced a second time. I danced better, too.

"Bill told me your mother's sick."

"Was Bill talking about me?"

"That's all he said."

"Yes," I said, "she's sick."

"I'm very sorry," she said.

"She's not too sick," I said. "She's okay really."

She didn't answer me, so I said,

"My dad's really a very nice guy. He's not always like that."

"Of course he isn't," she said. "I saw him only for a moment when we came in, and he was very charming to Bill. My father's never more charming than when he's in his cups."

"Are you trying to make me feel good?"

"No——"

"Both you and Bill talking about your fathers' getting drunk. Was my dad that bad?"

"I said he was very charming."

"I wish I hadn't come out here."

"But you're in a perfect mood to hate the crowd," she said, laughing.

"That's not much fun."

"It's fun if you have someone on your side, hating them, too."

When the dance was over we walked back to the table. Bill was on the other side of the dance floor, talking to some of his football buddies. While he was gone I tried to hold Barbara's hand under the table. She wouldn't let me.

She blushed and wouldn't look at me.

"I'm sorry——"

"That's all right. I'm just old-fashioned," she said.

We drank down our cokes very quickly.

"I enjoyed our phone conversation," she said.

I told her I enjoyed it too, but that I was so nervous I couldn't think of anything to talk about most of the time.

That really surprised her.

"I thought there wouldn't be anything but long pauses all the time I was talking to you," I said. "No kidding, Barb, once I almost hung up."

I ordered three more cokes, figuring that Bill had to come back sometime, and she told me this story about her first date. She said she was fifteen and in a panic because she didn't know what she'd be able to talk about with the guy. Her family told her to just act natural and be herself and everything would be all right, but she said she was too nervous to depend on chance or anything. So she went up in her bedroom and wrote down topics for conversation in a little notebook. She said the topic headings were **THE WEATHER**

BOOKS TRAVEL AND SPORTS, OR SOME OTHER TOPIC WHICH WILL FLATTER HIM. When the date came to pick her up she stuck the notebook in her purse, and she figured if she forgot the next topic all she had to do was to open her purse, like she was going to powder her nose, and check the next topic. But she said she was so nervous when they got alone that she forgot all about the notebook, and talked so much he couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"He never called me again either," she said.

"You must've made that up, Barb."

"No I didn't. I'll swear on anything it happened."

I told her it was one of the craziest stories I ever heard, and that it was worth coming out to the Country Club for.

"I was hoping you would come," she said. "The truth is—I wanted to find out if you were really so sad."

"I admit I was putting it on a little thick, Barb."

"That's what I thought."

We talked about this, that and the other thing and all I could think about was wanting to hold her hand. Then I got this inspiration. My inspirations always stink, but when I first get them they seem like the greatest inspirations going. I drank down my coke in one swallow, and leaned toward her.

"Barb—let me take you home. Let's leave right now."

"But Bill brought me," she said. "I can't leave with you. I'm surprised you'd even ask me."

"It was just an idea," I said. "I was only kidding."

I got up from the table.

"You're not leaving, are you?"

"I'm tired," I said. "I'm going home. So long. Thanks for letting me dance on your feet."

"But why leave so soon?"

"I'm pretty tired," I said.

Right then Bill came back.

I had to make up my mind whether to stay or go. I mean you can't keep standing beside a table, like an idiot, without people thinking you're out of your mind.

"So long Bill—Barbara. Good running into you."

"So long, O.H.," Bill said. "Keep slugging."

Barb didn't say anything; in fact she was talking to a girl at the next table, and I don't think she even saw me leave.

Well, I decided no more stupid taxicabs for this boy. I walked the six miles home. When I got home it was two-thirty. I was almost frozen to death, and I was in one of those moods where you feel glad you're almost frozen to death. Most of the way home I played this game with myself, that I was alone in Alaska and the temperature was seventy-five degrees below zero, that I'd just shot my Husky because it tried to eat me, and every time I spit I spit solid ice. Boy, did I have a ball! I didn't kill myself until I got home because I was too tired to think up another situation.

When I went upstairs I looked in my father's room. He wasn't there. Probably Bill's old man sobered him up a little, and they were both getting drunk together. I could just see Bill's mother if his old man came staggering in tomorrow sometime very drunk. His mother happens to be a real prude.

10

It's funny how you're never really satisfied. You think you're so unhappy at a certain time and when you look back at all that happened, maybe only a month later, you see that it wasn't so bad. I'm talking about December. December wasn't so bad when I thought about it on January the seventeenth.

For one thing I had to go to school only half the month in December; I had the last two weeks off for Christmas vacation. And another thing, before vacation started I found out I passed every class, even Geometry, and got an A on my final exam in English. I remember I was so happy when school was over that afternoon I felt like skipping down the street. I didn't, though.

And, boy, my mother was very happy that I didn't flunk anything. That was the best thing of all about December—making her happy. I didn't do that in every month of the year. Even talking to Barbara on the phone and seeing her at the New Year's dance made December seem better when I thought about it later, because I got the idea that maybe something could happen be-

tween us if I really strained myself and started getting my hair cut once in a while.

But that was December.

On January the seventeenth I went downtown to the store to meet my father. It was the warmest January the seventeenth in Fleming in thirty years. It was nearly sixty-five out and the rain had been falling all day. I was soaked when I got down to the store, and I used about twenty paper towels to dry off my face and neck and hair. My father wasn't in when I got there.

Mr. Cannon was talking to an English buddy of his, who was visiting America for a couple of months, and I get a big charge out of listening to those guys talk. He has a lot of English friends and they're always coming in to see him. Mr. Cannon loves England even though he's only been there twice, and he doesn't seem to think they can do anything wrong. He loves England so much I heard him say one time he was sorry we ever won our independence. My old man gets pretty sore when he talks like that.

This English character's name was Mr. Oglivy-Davis. He talked more like an Englishman than people do in the movies even. I pretended to look at the Audubon bird book, but I was listening to them and watching them over the top of the book. This guy Oglivy-Davis had a wiry-looking red mustache.

They were laughing and fooling around.

"I say—isn't that a corporation you're forming, Cannon?"

Mr. Cannon looked at his stomach and patted it.

"Well," he said, "it has the look of a corporation. It's this damn heavy American food."

"It looks to me like a corporation, old chap."

He winked at me. If he was anything like Mr. Cannon he loved an audience.

"You're not getting any thinner yourself, Davis. I remember when you were quite the ladies' man at Rodney and Company."

"That was a frightfully long time ago, you know."

"It was '23. You were twenty-six then. I guess that places you."

"I say, we're getting on, aren't we?"

Mr. Cannon slapped him on the back.

"One could say that. You're looking damn chipper, though."

"D'you really think so? I do believe you chaps over here age more rapidly. For the life of me I don't know why. Of course you have that bloody Yoga to keep you young."

"What's so goddam bloody about Yoga?"

"H'm—well, it is a bit of a crashing bore, isn't it, old chap? The strenuous exercise?"

"I'll bet I can still outdrink you, Davis, and I was seventy-two last week."

"I say, Cannon, you bring back some jolly good memories. We did have some bully times in those days!"

"They were good times all right," Mr. Cannon said. "The young Englishman trying to crash the American stage, and selling books in Rodney's part time. And now look at you! The successful Shakespearean actor—condescending once every few years to visit the country that got him started."

"It was a rotten business, though, your leaving Rodney's. Drunk too much, eh?"

"That's what they said," Mr. Cannon said. "I'll bet I can still outdrink you. Let's make the nearest pub, Davis; I'll lay you out."

"Jolly good idea, old chap. It's a go."

Right then I walked up to them.

"I say," this fellow said, "what's your name?"

"Owen Harding," I said, shaking hands with him. "My father owns this store."

"I know, I know. Done a lot of mail ordering from your father. He has one of the best reputations in this country, you know. What a pity he never set up shop in New York," he said.

"I guess he thought about it once," I said.

"Come on, Davis, let's blow. I'm thirsty."

"You're a good-looking young chap," this Davis said to me as he started toward the door. "D'you think you'll sell books one day?"

"I doubt it. I don't think so."

"The boy's too lazy," Mr. Cannon said. "Harding, the poor misguided man, thinks he'll have a lawyer for a son."

"Well," I said, "Mr. Cannon is a bookseller, and after knowing him for eight years I think I'll try selling shoes."

Davis roared with laughter.

"I say, Cannon, he has you pegged."

"He's a cunning boy," Mr. Cannon said. "Listen, boy, will you take over until that woman comes back? She's shopping. She shops incessantly," he said, turning to Davis. As he opened the door he said, "Your father should be back soon. He's out for the afternoon with a friend of his. A Dr. Snyder I think."

"Oh," I said. That really hit me.

"I say—it was jolly nice meeting you. Should you ever visit London please look me up."

"I will. Thank you."

"Take it slow," Mr. Cannon said to me.

"Cheerio!"

"Good-by," I said.

Right after they left Mrs. Kaywoodie came in with eight pounds of coffee in a big brown sack. She's a big fat hoarder. I told her about meeting this guy Davis and with a sniff she said she'd met him. Mrs. Kaywoodie said he's a big actor in English movies and a close friend of Mr. Cannon's. They write letters to each other a lot. I said why if he's such a great actor haven't I ever heard his name? And she said he's got a stage name. I'd never heard of that either. I've seen only two English movies in my life anyway.

When Mrs. Kaywoodie told me about this guy Davis she tried very hard not to sound impressed. But she was impressed as hell. You could tell. Her face was flushed the color of Davis's mustache all the time she talked about him. Then she tried to give me a big snow job on what a failure Mr. Cannon is compared with all his famous friends, and I got so bored I yawned in her face. I mean, for crissake, he's such a nice old guy! Why should anybody hold so much against such a nice old guy?

I looked at the Audubon bird book until my father came in at five-thirty. He didn't take off his coat or hat or anything. He just told me to hurry. He told Mrs. Kaywoodie to close the store. I don't believe I've ever seen anybody so gray in the face as my father

was when we drove home that night. I didn't even try to talk to him, or ask him any questions. All the way home I looked out the window and tried to concentrate on everything that was going on outside.

We passed two new apartment buildings that were being built. It was still raining pretty hard, and the water was beginning to flood the gutters as more and more snow melted. All the way home I could hear the click-clack-click-clack of the windshield wipers. Near our house a couple of kids were standing barefooted in a gutter, pulling the grate off a sewer, and another kid was poking sticks inside the sewer and trying to clear it out. I wished I was one of those kids for a day.

My father brought the car to a stop by the curb in front of our house. He didn't move to get out. He just sat there looking at me.

"Aren't you coming in?" I said.

"I'm having dinner with Pete Snyder," he said.

I had my hand on the door, but I was waiting.

Finally he looked away from me.

"Your mother is going to die in two or three months."

He said it just like that. Like he was saying it was raining out. And I acted like I thought he'd said it was raining out.

He left a few minutes later. I don't know how long I stood out in the rain. I just stood there like a stupid idiot who has to be told when to get in out of the rain. Only there was no one around to tell me to.

11

During February and March I could hardly tell the days and the weeks apart; everything I did seemed like everything else, very dull and deadly, and because I was like this all the time I wasn't the best company going. Five days a week I got up in the morning and made my breakfast and went to school—most of the time I went alone because I couldn't stay out of arguments with Pooch any more. And at noon I ate a crummy lunch in the crummy cafeteria, usually with the guys, and after school let out I walked over to the St. Lawrence to visit with my mother. At night my old man and I had dinner together at the City Club or else at Mrs.

Dobbs's boardinghouse, a very nice place that we'd found. One day, sometime early in March, I saw in a mirror what an unhappy-looking guy I was getting to be. I couldn't say it was my eyes or my mouth or any one thing—it was just there in my face.

This Dr. Snyder started coming in from Detroit quite often to see mom, and he got my old man to cut down a whole lot on his drinking. He said it wasn't hurting him as much as it was my mother—he said she knew he was drinking too much, and she felt it was her fault for not being well enough to take care of him. And the longer she stayed in the hospital, the more concerned she got with me. I looked too thin. I looked too pale. I had dark circles under my eyes. According to her you'd think I was dying! She made me feel like I had three days to live, that with plenty of luck I might be able to stagger around Fleming for another week before I had a fatal heart attack.

So that's how we got Virginia to cook and keep house. My mother told my old man to get somebody from the agency with good references. You should have seen her. As sick as she was and everything, she wanted my father to drive this Virginia out to the hospital so she could interview her. She almost drove my old man out of his mind. Finally she let him hire Virginia, once she got a complete description, and Virginia did everything around the house except the laundry. Mrs. Haley, a very jolly widow who lived a few blocks from us, had done our laundry for many years. Well, I went for everything about Virginia except her cherry pies; they had this gelatin in them that looked like red glue and tasted like rubber. For those four weeks she was with us I ate her cherry pies; she baked about four a week, and I ate them because I thought she was a great gal. I wished she made pumpkin pies or apple pies or something you couldn't put gelatin in, or else no pies at all, but I didn't want to say anything to her. The best thing of all about Virginia was the way she could sing Negro spirituals. Very sad and blue. I'm pretty sure she could have made a living in a night club someplace if she'd wanted to.

When my mother came home at the end of March she gave Virginia two weeks' notice. She never did like to have other women

around the house, because she said she'd rather do all the work herself than cope with inefficiency. My old man told me that even when me and Paul were kids she hated having nurses and maids and got rid of them as quick as she could. I really hated to see Virginia go.

The most terrible thing about her coming home was that she didn't know what was happening. She knew she wasn't well, but she didn't really know what was going on. Instead of having one woman around the house, as soon as she was home she had three nurses with her, working eight-hour shifts. She hated it but she couldn't do without them. She couldn't hold any food any more, and these three nurses fed her by injections, and they did a lot of other things for her too that I didn't know too much about. It was really terrible—my mother coming home like this and not knowing that she was dying.

I stayed away from the house all I could. There wasn't any place I wanted to go or anything I wanted to do, but I hardly ever stayed in the house. I went to movies a lot; for about three weeks after she came home I went to a movie every night, which worked out just right because Fleming's got seven movie theaters. I started staying away from Bill and Deacon because their jokes didn't seem so funny any more and everything they did seemed crude and gave me a royal pain, and I didn't see Pooch very much either because it didn't matter what we did, we'd end up fighting about it.

So I found myself with Herby most of the time. He was such a good, simple-hearted guy I could get very weepy and morbid and spooky with him and always feel better afterwards. I spent as much time at his house as I did at mine, and I think his mother kind of considered me one of the family.

I saw Barbara once in a while but not very much, because I'd found out that some guy by the name of Chester Crane had her ring and they were supposed to be going steady. This Chester character was from Grand Rapids, and she used to go out with him every time she went there to visit with her family. But a few months ago he moved to Cleveland and now he goes to University School, which is a prep school in Cleveland. Just before his family

moved to Cleveland, he came here to visit Barbara's family and I guess that's when they decided to go steady. Well, I found out about all this from Bill who found out from Barbara. He made it sound like she didn't really want to go with the guy, but I didn't believe him for a second. He was just hurt, is all. I almost called up Barbara to find out what the scoop really was, but after a while I got to feeling a little like Bill did. I couldn't see any sense in fooling around with a girl who was already going steady, and besides I was so worried about my mother I couldn't get very excited about this guy Chester. I couldn't get excited about anything much. I saw Barbara around school and walked her home a couple of times, but I sure wasn't any Prince Charming.

God, I was a miserable guy during February and March!

After mom came home my father stayed home every night. Most nights he read to her, out of the Bible a lot of the time, and he always sat in a chair beside her bed. Usually when he was in the room I didn't go in because he was getting very emotional. He seemed to blame himself for mom's illness. He cried a lot. And one night they raised their voices when I was coming downstairs from the third floor where I was supposed to be studying. I stood behind the attic door, not over ten feet from their bedroom, and listened——

My father wasn't sitting in the chair. I could hear him walking back and forth.

"But why wouldn't you?" I heard my mother say.

"I'll tell you again that's a damn foolish question!"

"But I want you to, my dear, if it'll make you happy."

"Couldn't we talk about something else? We hadn't ought to talk this way."

"Talk what way, dear? I'm merely making a suggestion."

"Well," he said, "I'd much rather be a widower."

"I don't think so. I don't really think so."

"I would, I tell you."

"In any event, my dear, I want you to know that you have my permission—and my blessings."

"Blessings! God, I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense.

You know you wouldn't talk this way to Paul. If you'd every really cared for me——"

"I'm sorry if you don't understand."

"Oh, but I do understand. You bet I do."

Then I couldn't hear anything at all for a second. I couldn't move away. I wanted to, I really wanted to, but I couldn't move away.

"Poor poor dear," my mother said. "I'm sorry I'm like this. I hate for you to see me this way."

"I don't care. Just don't talk about it any more. Please."

"It doesn't do any good to say I'm sorry?"

"That's not it."

"Nor to tell you how I feel after all these years?"

"Please! I just don't want to talk about it."

"I love you very much, my dear."

"Yes, you've certainly proved it. Telling me to marry again."

"You don't understand at all."

"But I do understand. All too goddamn clearly."

"It's not all my fault, dear. Let's just say—let's say we weren't right somehow, and leave it at that."

"That's right," my father said. "That's the thing to do. Leave it at that—just one more evasion. That's what we've always done."

"I'm awfully sorry," my mother said.

"If it wasn't our own son——"

"Don't say that, it isn't true. You know it isn't. If it were true you'd hear it from me now."

"Even as a small boy Paul hated me," my father said, raising his voice.

"He did not hate you. He only thought you didn't love me enough."

"But——"

"Those were his very words before he went in the service."

"D'you think he had the right to make such an accusation?"

"Please," my mother said. "I can't talk any more. Please give me some medicine. I'm feeling weak again."

I heard my old man open the door, and I sat back on the stairs.

I didn't breathe or anything for a minute. And as soon as he walked back into the bedroom I walked very softly back upstairs. I decided to read some more of that *Studs Lonigan* even though it was sort of drab and depressing. Besides seeing movies, I'd been reading a lot of books lately. Mostly drab and depressing ones. I was really in the mood for them. I guess you get like that. You get so you want to see somebody have it worse than you. I read *Studs Lonigan* until three o'clock in the morning. That's when I finished it.

That spring the snow melted very late. It didn't really begin to look like spring until the second week in April. Outside the grass was getting green and the trees were budding and the birds were singing in the trees again. I'd gotten pretty friendly with Mrs. Dahlman, the night nurse, and when she wasn't busy with my mother she would help me with Geometry. I mean I would lie around and she would do it for me. Some Miss Licht was the midnight-to-eight nurse, so I hardly ever saw her. She was very pretty. She should have been on the day shift, or the afternoon one. Mrs. Black, who looked quite a lot like Doc Goody for a woman, took care of mom between eight and when Mrs. Dahlman came on at four o'clock. She was always complaining about what a wreck she was. She was always letting out large belches and patting her stomach. And she spent all her free time reading up on her crazy symptoms in those medical journals. It was really a breeze to figure out why she was a nurse. Nobody like her would be happy unless they were rolling in illness all the time. I stayed out of her way as much as I could.

My marks in the 10-A were in a class by themselves. I never cracked a book, but my marks were awful. At the end of the third marking period I had a C average in English and except for straight A's in Band, I had a D average in everything else. My father had to know because he signed my feeble cards every month, but he thought it was best not to tell mom. The funny thing was, she didn't even ask! That bothered the hell out of me. I'd just as soon she'd bawled me out than not to ask like that. My old man bawled

me out, though. He even yelled at me once, which isn't like him at all. But I couldn't do anything about my grades. I just couldn't concentrate. After my mother came home I didn't even care any more.

One afternoon after school let out I read to her out of *Through the Looking Glass*. She was really getting very peculiar about what she would listen to. Most of the time she wanted you to read something out of the Bible to her, but once in a while she would let you read children's stories. I liked that better. She liked to have you read her the children's stories she remembered from when she was a girl, like the Oz books and the *Wind in the Willows*, and stuff she read to me and Paul when we were kids like the Mary Poppins books and the Pooh books. She seemed to enjoy them a lot, but sometimes for no reason at all she would start crying. I wouldn't know she was crying unless I looked up from the book because she never made any noise when she cried.

Anyway, I was reading her that part about Humpty Dumpty and Alice for about the third time, where Humpty Dumpty wants to show Alice he can recite poetry. Mom was nuts about it. I only read her the poetry part.

“In winter, when the fields are white,
I sing this song for your delight——
In spring, when woods are getting green,
I'll try and tell you what I mean:
In summer, when the days are long,
Perhaps you'll understand the song:
In autumn, when the leaves are brown,
Take pen and ink, and write it down.”

Mom smiled.

“And then Alice says ‘I will, if I can remember it so long.’ She’s making fun of poor Humpty Dumpty.”

I tried to get excited right along with her, but I couldn't. When you read that stuff to her she acted just like a little girl. She would smile and laugh and cry and wonder what was going to happen next, and get so excited she would have jumped right out of bed if she hadn't of been so weak. I didn't mind her getting childish like

that, except that she'd gotten so thin and skeleton-like, and so helpless that I would get to feeling older than her. I didn't want to feel older than her. But that was only a mood with her, and as she got sicker her moods changed very fast. And sometimes she could be so stern and old I couldn't recognize her.

"I'd better read you something else," I said. "You know this by heart."

"It doesn't matter, darling. I love to hear it, and you read it so well. Would you open the windows a little, please?"

Boy, I was glad she asked me to do that! There was something that bothered me all the time, but I tried not to even think about it. That was the smell in the room. The smell of her sickness. She never said anything about it, so I didn't know whether she could smell it herself or not. If it smelled like anything, it was sort of like that eggy decay you get in the chemical labs at school, or maybe like milk clotting yellow in a bottle. I spent a lot of time holding my breath. When I wasn't reading to her I would hold my breath most of the time, but I always tried to do it so she wouldn't notice. That would have been the worst of all, if she'd noticed.

I pushed the windows out a few inches. Most of the windows in our house are french windows, and they go out instead of up and down; the windows are about ten feet high and they're made for big rooms like ours are. After I did that, mom made a motion with her hand. I walked nearer to her. You had to be near to her because her voice didn't carry too far.

"The brush, Owen. The one with the silver handle."

I got the brush from the vanity table and walked back to the chair by her bed.

"D'you want a hundred strokes again?"

"Please. Just lift me up a little. Carefully now. Now slip the pillow up behind my back."

"Okay, Mom?"

"That's fine, darling."

I began brushing her hair. I did it very slowly, with long and soft strokes. She liked it that way.

"Darling? D'you know how much your mother weighs?"

"No," I said. "How much?"

"Well, last time I was in the bathroom—last week Thursday—Mrs. Dahlman put me on the scale. I weighed sixty-eight pounds."

I didn't say anything.

"Mrs. Dahlman is very nice," she said. "She told me I'm as light as a wren. And much easier to handle. Darling—I cried after she weighed me. I shall never step on the scale again."

I shook my head up and down.

"How many strokes so far?"

"Thirty," I said.

"I think you'd better stop at fifty, darling. I'm tired. I'm beginning to feel sick. After you finish please call Mrs. Dahlman. I think she's in the kitchen fixing dinner for you and your father."

"I'll call her in a minute, Mom."

"I'm sorry she isn't a better cook."

"Boy, she sure is crummy," I said. I figured that's what she wanted to hear.

"Oh, that reminds me. Tomorrow you'll have to come right home from school. Mrs. Dahlman won't be here in the afternoon. Is that all right with you, darling?"

"Sure," I said. "Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty. That does it. I'll tell Mrs. Dahlman to come up now."

She took my hand in hers.

"You're my good boy," she said.

I kissed her on the forehead.

"Listen, Mom, is it all right to invite some guys over tonight to play ping-pong? It won't disturb you, will it?"

"No, of course not."

And then she looked worried, and pressed my hand tighter.

"But I don't want to see anyone. Not anyone. Not the way I am now. I don't even let your father bring up the Harts any more. And Gertrude Hart and I have been best friends for years."

"All right, Mom. I won't bring them up."

"Give Pooch my love, darling."

"I will. I'll call Mrs. Dahlman now."

That night Pooch and Bill and Deacon came over to play ping-pong. We get together about once every two weeks to play doubles, and me and Pooch always play against Deacon and Bill. There's a chart down in the basement in the recreation room where we keep score of who wins, and since we started keeping score about a year ago, our side has won eighty-one games, and their side sixty-six. And that's really a wonder, seeing that the two most skillful cheaters are on their side. Bill's the best player and I'm almost as good, and Pooch is just a little better than Deacon, who's the weakest.

Our side lost the first two games, and I got sore as hell at Bill for yelling so loud. I was in a crummy mood anyway. I'd been in a crummy mood for weeks. When he wouldn't shut his big mouth, I threw my paddle down on the table.

"Shut up, Bill. If you keep yelling we can't play. I mean it. My mother's sick."

"I wasn't yelling."

Like hell he wasn't, the bastard!

"Come on, it's your service," Deacon said. "You're trying to cool us off."

I leaned against the table.

"Will you guys kindly keep it down?"

"Sure," Bill said. "Sure, pimples. Anything you say."

He called me that because my skin was all broken out again. Boy, he was really a wit! I didn't say a word. I just hated him, is all.

I served and the ball went about two feet beyond the table; that happened because I was so mad. I served two more off the table, and that made me so mad I threw my paddle and missed Bill's head by about only two feet.

"That's a goddam smart thing to do."

"Sorry I missed. Give me another chance."

"Jesus," Pooch said. "You're really getting to be touchy, Harding. Come on—let's play."

That really made me mad; Pooch calling me by my last name like that. He'd never done that before. I was so mad I was shaking.

I had two more serves, so instead of trying to serve it right, I

didn't hit the table on my side at all. I aimed the ball right at Bill and swung as hard as I could. I caught him right in the forehead. He blinked a couple of times.

"You dumb bastard," he said. "Boy, you're really clever. You do it again and——"

"I'll do it again," I said. "Just watch."

On the fifth serve I tried to bean him again, but I missed by a mile.

Deacon was laughing.

"Five-love," he said. "This'll be the first time we've ever skunked them, Bill."

Pooch threw his paddle on the floor. He split the handle.

"You can play alone, hey. I've played with you for the last time." He put on his jacket. "I'm shoving off."

"Why you stupid goddam moron!" I yelled. "You broke the paddle!" I picked up the paddle and showed it to him. "They're ninety-five cents apiece. Shell over, Miller."

"Why don't you go to hell," he said.

He kept poking his finger into my ribs.

Bill walked around the table, and Deacon was right behind him. Bill's stupid red face was grinning.

"I mean it, Miller. You owe my father ninety-five cents."

"Just try and get it!"

"I mean it. You owe him ninety-five cents, and goddam it, you'll pay it."

"Like hell I will."

"Goddam you, I'm not kidding. Shell over."

"I won't, for crissake!"

"Why you cheap sonofabitch!"

I was so mad I didn't know what I was saying. I can get so mad talking like that that I start crying.

"You broke the goddam paddle, Miller. It was the newest one, too."

"It wasn't my fault."

"Oh, whose fault was it? I suppose it was my fault."

"It sure as hell wasn't mine, you stupid ass-hole. I'm leaving. I

hope to hell—listen, I want you to know I hope I never see you again.”

“That’ll be at least three months too soon,” I shouted.

Pooch ran up the stairs and went out the back door, slamming it.

Deacon and Bill were playing a game, and it was more than I could stand to hear Bill laughing. I went and stood at the middle of the table by the net and watched them play two or three points.

“Four-three, your favor. My serve’s getting better. Don’t you think my game’s better, Bill?”

“It’s coming along, Deac. Bend your wrist a little more on the serve.” Bill served a very fast ball that touched the edge of the table and aced Deacon. “You see what I mean?” he said.

“That was a lucky point,” I said.

“He planned it that way,” Deacon said. “You’re just jealous.”

Bill didn’t pay any attention to me. He just kept playing and talking to Deacon.

“You play a slow game, see? So give the ball more english. Chop it.” Bill served him a screwy, spinning ball that hopped right over Deacon’s paddle.

“Great shot,” Deacon said. “Seven-three yours.”

“You don’t play the ends of the table enough, Deac. It’s no good to play fast if you can’t pick your spot.”

“I know, I know. I’m getting it, though, don’t you think?”

“Bill doesn’t think, Deacon.”

They didn’t say anything to me.

I began fiddling around with the metal thing that held up the net, and wondered why guys like Deacon who were the worst at games took them the most seriously.

“Bill, let’s shove off after this game.”

“Let’s go right now if you want to.”

“I’d rather finish this game. It’s close.”

“Why don’t you fellows go now?” I said. “It’s late. I was just going to kick you out anyway.”

Bill threw his paddle on the table. “Okay by me, boy.” He was smiling a little. It was awful, that smile. It made me feel like I

was getting the worst of something without anything really happening.

Deacon said he wanted to finish the game.

I pulled the net down.

"Sorry," I said.

Deacon put the paddle in the jacket pocket of his windbreaker. He had his own paddle. Bill put on his sport coat. They started upstairs, and I followed them. At the front door I told Deacon how glad I was that he and Bill were friends again. I told him how glad I was that it didn't bother him just because Bill had almost raped Evelyn. They just stood there, looking at me. I started to say how glad I was that he hadn't *really* sent that liquor to Bill's house, but when I started to say that it didn't matter any more. Everything that was bothering me kind of tied itself into a knot and left me feeling empty. And it's a good thing I didn't mention anything about the liquor. I could tell Deacon didn't like me too much any more as it was, but if I'd said anything about the liquor I knew he'd never speak to me again.

I said so long to them, but neither of them said anything. I went back down the basement.

In my pocket I found a pack of matches. I began lighting them, and let them burn down as far as I could without blowing them out. When I was a kid I used to love matches. I used to burn things all the time. Once I set our kitchen on fire, and twice I tried to set old man Parker's house on fire, and a long time ago when he kept horses I tried to burn down his stables, too. He lives up past Pooch's house.

Without even thinking about it I began burning up the ping-pong balls. There were six of them, and I burned them all. They made an awful stink. I heard my father call to me from upstairs, but I just sat there feeling like bawling but not being able to. After I burned them all I picked up the gray ball of ash that each one made and flushed them down the can in the basement. The place really did stink.

My old man came downstairs.

"What's burning?" he asked me.

"Nothing."

"Something's sure as hell burning. I could smell it in the kitchen."

"Maybe it's from outside."

He looked at the floor by my feet. I didn't look down, but I was pretty sure there were still ashes on the floor. Then he looked at me kind of funny.

"You know that I won't tolerate lying," he said softly. "You know that, don't you?"

I didn't answer him.

"You've been burning something down here, Owen. What in the hell's the idea?" He pounded the ping-pong table so hard with his fist I thought it was going to cave in. "Are you trying to burn the house down—are you? Well, answer me!"

"I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to. The ping-pong balls burned. I mean I burned them without realizing it."

"Ping-pong balls! What in God's name possessed you to do that?"

"I don't know. I just started lighting matches—oh, I don't know!"

"Christ Almighty, Owen, that was certainly clever. Your mother is sick upstairs, and you insist on burning things. Why did you do it?"

"I don't know. That's the truth. I really don't."

"Oh Christ! Go on upstairs—your mother wants to say good night to you. Don't ever let me catch you doing anything like this again, Owen. Do we understand each other?"

"I guess so," I said.

"Don't ever do it again."

"I won't," I said as I started upstairs.

"I think we'd better stop the ping-pong sessions. You fellows were making way too much noise."

"Okay. We won't play any more."

We walked through the living room—the grandfather clock was chiming ten—and started upstairs to the second floor.

"I can't imagine what made you do that, old man."

"I promised you I wouldn't again."

"Well, you'd better not."

I said good night to Mrs. Dahlman, and told her not to worry about not coming in tomorrow. I said I'd come right home from school. And I kissed my mother good night.

By ten-thirty I was in bed, but I didn't sleep very well. I tossed and turned most all night.

12

The next day was like the first day of summer. It was between seventy-five and eighty in the shade. The old heat just pounded down. I really had an awful case of spring fever all day, and I sat through all my stupid classes without hearing anything. I just looked out the window. It was the longest day of school going; the whole day took a little over three years. In the afternoon Mr. Diederle, who was my Civics teacher in the 10-A, asked me some question about how the average man in this country feels about his government, what part he feels he should play and all that stuff. I didn't even hear the question the first time. Mr. Diederle speaks very quietly anyway. He's real feeble. The question was very important because he hardly ever asks you anything, and when he does he gives you a mark. It counts as much as a *written* examination mark.

I'd slipped way down in my seat. I sat up and asked him to repeat the question. That usually drives teachers crazy, but Mr. Diederle's too feeble to raise a fuss.

He repeated it.

I thought about it for a while.

"Well," I said, "I'd say it all depends on the individual." That's always a very clever thing to say if you don't know the answer to something. It always mixes the teachers up.

"Would you please elaborate on that, Owen?"

"Well—some people have a negative attitude about the government. Some people have a—positive attitude. The negative people are too negative to even think about their government much." I stopped for a minute and acted like I was thinking. I tried to look as serious as I could. When you're on a spot you should look as

serious as you can, and throw three or four big words around. "The negative attitude," I went on, "is both the cause and result of economic strife."

"What do you mean by that exactly? Define your point, Owen."

"Well, Mr. Diederle, poor people don't trust the government—they think it's out to get them. And the government thinks that the poor people are trying to sponge off it. So it's usually the poor people who have a negative attitude toward the government, and it's not any more their fault than it is the government's."

Mr. Diederle had a happy grin on his feeble face. He was always telling us that individuals and society were equally to blame for the faults of the world, so he loved my answer.

I rushed on:

"And then there's the positive attitude. A man who's doing all right in his business doesn't have any quarrel with his government. In fact he wouldn't want to see it change a bit. So he takes part in it and reads all about it in the papers." I rolled my eyes up and bit my lower lip, like ideas were just flooding all over me. They weren't, though. "In my opinion neither attitude is completely right. The negative people want what they haven't got and instead of trying for it themselves they're always hounding the government for it, and the positive people want more than they've got, and they're greedy because they've got too much already. As long as the two attitudes clash, we'll have trouble with our government."

"Very good, Owen. Very good."

He looked sort of puzzled, though. But when he said very good like that, with a happy grin on his face, you knew you had an A. I really wished Geometry was more like Civics. The trouble is, you can't bluff very well about 90-degree angles and tangents and all that stuff.

After school was over I took off for home alone. I didn't go down the main drag like I usually do, toward the center of town. I walked west past the Atlas Drop Forge which was boom-booming away like crazy, and the sun was so goddam hot the sidewalk hurt the bottoms of my feet. I started counting the steps I took

from tree to tree. At first the number of steps I took were how many thousands of dollars I'd be earning at twenty-two, and how many thousands all the other guys I knew would be earning. If it looked like Deacon or Bill would earn more than me, I took very long steps and cut down their salaries a little. Then, for a block, the number of steps I took were how many years I'd live and how many girls I'd kiss. I was going to kiss my hundred-and-tenth girl when I was a hundred and twenty-three. I got tired of fiddling around like that. I used to do it all the time when I was a kid, only then it was how many home runs I'd belt out of Briggs's Stadium and what my batting average would be when I was a big star on the Detroit Tigers. I usually managed to bat about .600 or something. I was walking home slowly.

Another thing I used to do when I was a kid was try and make everything into something else when I didn't feel good. I used to imagine that the trunks of trees were baseball bats and that the leaves were green fielding gloves, and all kinds of weird things like that. I decided to try it as I was walking along. The only thing I could think about, that wouldn't make me think of my mother, was the sun because it was so goddam hot. I tried to tell myself that the sun was an orange basketball on a blue court that didn't have any beginning or end, or any players on it. That wasn't so hot. Crazy ideas like that don't work so well when you try too hard to do them. I wished I could lose myself, though. I really wanted to, so I could forget about my mother. I was beginning to wonder if the world was against me. I was really getting to think it was. Now, if there was a God in the world—if there really was—why wouldn't he let you forget about something for a minute, if you just asked for a little thing like that? All I wanted to do was forget about my mother for a minute. But I was too old to ask for miracles any more. I knew there weren't any. The orange basketball and the blue sky-court wouldn't help me to forget anything—all that looking up in the sky did was blind me so that I almost ran into a tree.

I cut across the vacant lot across the street from the Olds, and started down the hill toward my house. I was sweating like crazy. As I passed Parker's house I could smell the flowers in his back

yard. The lilacs were in bloom. They had that real heavy, sort of sad smell. Old Parker grew just about every kind of flower going, and he was about the crankiest old bastard who ever lived. When some of his flowers came into bloom, the roses or the irises, he would have them dug up and sell them to the florists around town. The old guy didn't have to do that; he was lousy with money. He took the cake as far as misers go. Anyway, I stopped in front of his house and took a very deep whiff of the flowers, and thought about how my mother would go for some of those lilacs. She's mad about lilacs. While I was standing there, the Parkers' maid hobbled out to the porch with some empty milk bottles. She looked like something out of the Stone Age. I waved to her, but I don't think she saw me, and then I took off.

I thought of stopping at Pooch's dump for a minute, and then I decided not to. After all—he broke the stupid paddle. I didn't even look at his house as I passed by. I hoped he saw me walk by like that.

I walked in the house and shut the front door behind me. I started up the stairs, and I heard mom call out in a very weak voice and sort of sleepily.

"Owen, is that you?"

I opened the door to her room and just stuck my head around the corner of it, inside.

"No, Mom, it's a jewel thief."

She didn't even smile or anything. She really looked very bad, worse than I'd ever seen her look. And the smell was very strong and I began holding my breath right away. That's way it was hard to read to her, because when I did I had to breathe a lot.

"You're home late," she said in a whisper.

"No I'm not. I came right from school."

"You must've walked slowly."

"I don't know. I don't think so. Is there anything you need, Mom? Can I fix your pillow or something?"

"No, I'm fine, darling. Sit down. Mrs. Black took care of everything before she left. She just left a minute ago."

I sat down in the chair by her bed. I couldn't even look at her

face. God, she looked miserable! The veins on her face stuck out about a mile. She reached for the Bible on the night table, and her hand sort of fluttered over and back, like a bird with a broken wing that's falling to the ground because it can't fly any more. I thought she was going to drop the Bible, but I didn't reach out to help her; I just pretended I didn't notice.

"Darling, will you read me the Twenty-third Psalm again? It's so comforting. I love to hear it over and over again."

That just about did it for me. It really almost did it for me. In the last few months I'd heard that Psalm about a thousand times, and I couldn't believe a word of it. And it was all I could do to stand to read a word of it. What did it have to do with my mother? Just a lot of words about gloom and darkness and shadows and valleys and death. Just a lot of stupid words, words, words! What did it have to do with her? She'd never listened to that stuff before, and now it seemed like cheating. Like hitting below the belt, or stealing the best set of silver from a poor man or something. But, for crissake! I loved her so much. Why was the world so mean as to take her like this? Why was the world so mean as to take her away from me this way? I held the Bible in my hands and didn't open it, and I felt so hot I could hardly stand it.

"Listen Mom," I said, "This noon I played ball at Scott's park. It was nice out so a few of us walked over. I left my stuff at the park, and the catcher's mask doesn't belong to me. I'd better go get it, don't you think? Some of the kids around there are liable to pick it up and forget who it belongs to."

It was a lie, and I didn't want her to see my face.

"I'll be right back, Mom. In a flash—I promise."

And then I took off before she had a chance to say anything.

I ran as fast as I could to Parker's house, even though it was hot as all hell out. I snuck around the side of his house, and I couldn't see anybody. I could hear old man Parker bitching his head off at Silvy, his gardener, in the back yard someplace, but I could tell by the sound of their voices that they were way behind the garage. I picked a bunch of lilacs off from one of the bushes, and then I looked around. I was jumpy as all hell. I knew if Parker caught me

he'd make a very big deal out of it, so I yanked the lilacs off the bushes branches and all. I kept thinking of getting caught, and having a big trial and everything, and getting put in prison for life or something. I'm telling you I was a nervous wreck.

When I'd picked enough, I walked away a few steps, very slowly, and then I broke into a run and ran as fast as I could all the way home.

When I got home I cleaned the flowers in the sink, and fiddled around with the stems, to try and make them clean and smooth-looking. I figured it would be a lot better if they looked like store-bought flowers. When I put them in the vase I got from the buffet, though, they looked just like they'd just been stolen from Parker's back yard. That's the way they looked to me, anyway. I filled up the vase with water, and went upstairs.

I walked over to the side of mom's bed, and a little water spilled over the rim of the vase and felt very cool on my wrist. I could feel sweat all over my body.

"Mom," I said, "look, Mom, I've brought you a present."

"What is it, darling? You're not standing close enough."

I walked up to the bed.

"See? See what I've brought you? Lilacs. Your favorite flowers."

I held out the vase just above her face. A fly buzzed up to the vase and circled around the top and dipped into the flowers for a second and then flew away again, flying downward, like it was weighted down with water. I was afraid. I didn't know what to say. I was afraid of what *she* might say.

"Where did you get these?" she asked me. "You've already spent your allowance this week." Her voice was so soft I could hardly hear it.

"Dad's giving me some money tomorrow."

"I don't see the connection. . . ."

"There isn't any. There isn't any, I guess."

"Owen, I started——"

I held the vase closer to her face.

"Smell them, Mom. Take a deep breath. They really have a wonderful smell. Please smell them, Mom. Go ahead."

"Owen, I asked you a question."

"What did you ask me?"

"Where did you get these flowers?"

"Oh, Mom! I got them, that's all. What does it *matter* where."

"You've convinced me that you didn't buy them. You took them, didn't you Owen? Well—didn't you?"

"Look, Mom. Look how purple this bunch is. It makes the other bunches look real faded."

"I want a direct answer from you, young man. Not an evasion." Her voice was so thin and sickly I could hardly hear it, but her face was so stern!

I sort of arranged the lilacs in the vase.

"I wish you wouldn't ask me questions," I said.

"So you took them," she whispered. "You took them. You stole those flowers."

"Mom, for gosh sakes!—flowers grow all over the place. There happen to be a million flowers growing wild around here. Just aching to be picked! Besides—what difference does it make where I got them? I don't see the importance of knowing that. What's important is giving something—when you love somebody——"

I was trying to remember this poem I'd written in junior high school, but I couldn't. It would have helped me a lot of explain things, but I couldn't remember the stupid thing. And I had to show her what I meant. I just *had* to show her what I meant by the lilacs, that's all.

I looked up right then, and she looked so old and sad and so very tired—and nearly dead.

"You stole those flowers. Oh, darling, don't you know better than to do that? You ought to know without my having to tell you that stealing is a sin. I know you——"

"Let me explain, Mom——"

"Don't interrupt me," she said. "Don't ever do that."

Her voice was so thin I could just make out the words.

"I realize you meant them for me," she said, "but if you steal them——" She looked up at me. "You took them from Parker; he's the only one who keeps lilac beds. I want you to march right

over there and apologize to him. If your father was informed of . . .”

I couldn't stand to hear her any more. I ran out of the room and stood for a second with my back against the door, holding the lilacs, and the goddam water ran off the stems all over my arms and pants and shoes. I almost started to cry, but I ran my fist right into one of my eyes so hard that I couldn't cry. The pain of my fist hurt too much.

Then I took off down the stairs and ran outside, and stood out in front of the house, all screwed up in my mind and shaking like a bastard. All I knew was that I wanted to go somewhere and do something violent, or else kick the hell out of somebody.

Without even knowing I was doing it, I got my old man's pitchfork out of the garage, and walked up to Parker's house, dragging it behind me. And then without looking around to see if anybody was watching, I began digging a hole in the ground. The ground was hard as hell and I'm not too good with a pitchfork and I nearly sliced one of my feet off, but I was so crazy that nothing could stop me. I dug down into that goddam ground like a maniac. I dug without thinking how hot it was even, I was so mad. I dug that hole like in a fast movie.

When I got a deep enough hole, I took the lilacs and dumped them into the hole. Some water was still dripping off the stems. As soon as I dumped them in, I began shoveling the dirt back in the hole as fast as I could.

Just when I was finishing, I saw this little girl in a white dress watching me. She was holding a skipping rope in her hands like she was about to jump through it. It was Judy Parsons, who lived on the other side of the hill beyond Parker's house. I looked at her and for the first time in my life I felt older than some other person. I mean I *knew* I was older somehow. I wanted to tell her to go away, but I didn't have to. Right then she let out this bellowing war whoop and went skipping and dancing up the street toward her house.

When she was gone I put a few handfuls of dirt on top of the covered hole, and then packed it down very hard with the pitch-

fork. I couldn't do it very well with the pitchfork because of the prongs, so I got down and did it with my knees. When I was finished, it looked like the hole had never been made except for this ring of darker dirt where the hole was. And I knew that would go away soon.

I began to walk home, dragging the pitchfork behind me. And then I remembered that goddam poem I'd tried to remember earlier. *Then* I remembered it—when it didn't do me any good any more.

I remembered how proud I was when I'd written it. I'd written it in English class one year, and called it *To My Mother*. I'd only gotten a B on it, because the stupid teacher said the punctuation wasn't right.

As I walked along I said it out loud:

"If you do it for love
it is right—
if you do it in sight
of what is love."

After I said it I decided it wasn't much of a poem after all. I never said it out loud again.

13

Six days later at five o'clock in the afternoon my mother died. She had been close to death for the last two days and nights, so when she did die there were a lot of relatives in the house. It was a good thing, too, because my father was crying all the time, and if there hadn't been a lot of people around I don't know what he might have done. I stayed up on the third floor except for meals so I wouldn't be around all my three thousand relatives. They kept wanting to tell me how sorry they were, and this one old aunt of mine kept trying to put her arm around me and run her hand through my hair and all that. I stayed away from all of them all I could. I couldn't stand it. I stayed up on the third floor and read two books by Thorne Smith—*The Night Life of the Gods* and *Topper*. They were very funny books, and they kept my mind off things. I didn't laugh out loud very often, but I'm glad I had them

to read right then. Once I heard somebody coming up the stairs from the second floor. I turned off the lights and didn't make a noise.

"Owen? Owen, dear?"

It was this old aunt of mine—my mother's oldest sister. I hardly even knew her. She lived in Lake Forest, Illinois, but she spent all her time in Florida for her health. When she called to me like that, you couldn't have got me to open the door for anything. Her voice sounded like it would spill over with tears.

"Owen, dear, you are in there, aren't you?"

I started counting up to twenty-five. I decided if she wasn't gone by twenty-five, I'd ask her to go away and leave me alone. I heard her walk down the stairs before I finished counting, though. I spent the rest of the day reading—and most all night, too. I never went into the bedroom to see my mother.

The funeral was two days later. There were a lot of people in the Episcopal church. I sat in one of the front pews with my father, and two or three times he took my hand and squeezed it very hard. I didn't hear hardly a word Reverend Coons said. He talked very softly about how nice it was to die and go to heaven, and how nice it was that my mother had led such a good life. I didn't listen to him, but I noticed that he looked a lot like the church smelled—sort of dry and musty like he hadn't been out in the sun for a long time. The sermon lasted forever.

The drive to the cemetery was very slow. I sat with my old man, and used a nail file on my fingers, and then I gave it to him and he used it on his fingers. The day was warm and sunny, and some guys passed us who were riding out to the country on bikes, and they were laughing and fooling around. We sure were going awfully slow.

After the burial we drove back to town just as slowly and everybody came over to our house, and this old aunt of mine kept trying to make me eat something. I wasn't hungry. I kept *telling* her I wasn't hungry, but she wouldn't listen to me. She almost drove me out of my mind. I don't know how I got through the afternoon but I got through it somehow, and I was even glad when we went

back to the church. Reverend Coons was conducting a prayer meeting for all of us. I sat up in front with my father, but after a while I just couldn't stand it any more. If I'd have sat there one more minute, I'd have either burst out laughing or screamed. I got up from the pew and walked up the aisle, like I was going to the can and when I got outside I ran home as fast as I could.

When I got home I didn't seem to know what to do with myself. I put on some records but I wasn't in the mood to listen to them. I turned on the radio but there weren't any interesting programs on. I walked around the living room, picking things up and laying them down. There was one more of those Thorne Smith books I hadn't read, but it didn't seem funny any more. When I walked passed the marble-topped table I ran my finger across it. It was covered with dust. I took out my handkerchief and wiped it off.

While I was wandering around the house like that, I found a piece of paper all crumpled up that was laying next to the wastebasket. It was dated that afternoon.

I opened another pack of my father's cigarettes. He had a whole carton of them upstairs on his dresser, and I was smoking them like a fiend. I was almost eating them. I lit one, and read the letter:

Dearest Paul,

I have sat down and written you two long letters since your mother's death the day before yesterday, but I have not been able to mail either of the letters. The truth is, I do not know how to tell you that your mother has left us. I am too weak to know how to tell you, Paul.

I cannot express myself, even to myself. I still cannot believe that your mother, the only real support in my life, has been taken from me forever. I cannot convince myself that the one person who loved me, and even believed that the wrong things I did were not too wrong, has been removed from our world forever. And I am alone with my lack of belief, Paul, completely alone. I have never felt so badly, so inept in the face of days to come. I can think of nothing in my past with which to compare this feeling I have of solid loneliness.

This next part my father crossed out after he'd written it.

Until the very end your mother's thoughts were of others: of you and me and Owen. Just three days ago, Paul, she expressed great concern as to the state of your health over there in the "jungle climate," as she put it. Your mother was a remarkable woman——

That was all he wrote, except at the bottom of the page SEND WIRE was scrawled out in black crayon. And that's all there was. I sat for a while staring at the rug and didn't think about anything. Then I crumpled up the letter again and put it back by the wastebasket where I'd found it.

After I lit another cigarette I went into the dining room and called Western Union. I asked if any telegrams had been sent from Mr. Philip Harding to Mr. Paul Harding in the last two or three days, and they said no. When I first called that's all I wanted to know, but after I found out he hadn't sent one, I asked how much it would cost to send a telegram overseas, and they said where, and I said care of the post office in San Francisco. And I gave them Paul's serial number and APO number and all that stuff. It didn't cost much money at all, so I told them to say:

Paul, your mother died in her sleep the night before last. It was best that way. The doctor said she didn't know she was going, and that she felt no pain. Try to take it the best you can, Paul. We all will here. A letter will follow.

Your loving father

After I finished I went into the kitchen and poured myself a big glass of water and drank it down and then after I caught my breath, I had another glass. I was pretty nervous and shaky. It seemed right then like the last week was one lousy dream, and that if I tried hard enough I might wake up. I put ten records on the phonograph and lay down on the davenport, face down. I could hardly hear the records and I couldn't fall asleep and all I could think about was that I never wanted to go to school again. I didn't feel like facing crowds of people again for a long time, and I hoped the relatives wouldn't be able to find their way back from the church. If only I could be like Bill! Big and handsome and stupid and happy, with two parents and no worries. Or even like Pooch. Even though his old man had been in prison, he was pretty tough about things.

And even old Herby wouldn't be bad to be like—if you didn't think about yourself any more than Herby thinks about himself you could forget about how badly off you are. But I wasn't any of them, I was me. Owen Harrison Harding. One sad bastard, lying on the goddam davenport listening to Les Brown.

The doorbell rang right then, and I dragged my weary goddam body off the davenport and went to the door and opened it. It was Mrs. Kaywoodie. She was carrying a big box.

"Hello," I said. "Come on in, won't you?"

She was still dressed all in black. She'd been to the funeral. I wished she was dressed in red, and had blond hair instead of gray hair, and was about forty years younger, and wasn't coming to tell me how sorry she felt for me.

"Where is everybody, Owen? Where's your father?"

"They went back to church."

"Why aren't you with them?"

"I had a terrible stomach-ache," I said. "I came home by myself. Why don't you sit down, Mrs. Kaywoodie?"

She sat down with a groan. She always groans when she sits down.

"I've been worried to death about you, Owen. I don't think you should be alone like this." She cocked her head to one side and squinted at me. "Will they be back soon?"

"I don't know."

"Owen, you don't know how badly——"

"What's in the box?" I said.

She smiled and took the lid off the box.

"I brought you a cake. Chocolate. I baked it for you and your father."

"Thanks. Thanks very much."

She looked sad again. She came over to be sad, all the way from the other side of town, and if it was the last goddam thing she ever did she was going to be sad.

"Owen, I want you to know——"

"Does the music bother you, Mrs. Kaywoodie? It's kind of loud. It's jazz. I'll turn it off."

I went over and turned it off.

"Can I get you something to drink?" I asked her. "Tea or something?"

"No thank you. Thank you very much, Owen."

She was being very polite. I yawned.

"Boy, I'm tired! I'm ready for bed."

"You look awfully pale, Owen. You don't look well at all."

"Oh, I'm okay. Dr. Goody says I'll live another month if I spend it all in bed."

That made her mad. I knew it would.

"Owen, this is no time to be funny. I know how you feel, and you shouldn't try and pretend."

"Mrs. Kaywoodie—you don't know how I feel!"

Suddenly I had shouted at her, and it was very embarrassing. We didn't say anything for a minute.

"That's right, Owen. I don't. I shouldn't have said that. But, tell me, are you sure you're all right? Alone like this? Why don't you go back to church? I'll drive you."

"I'm all right. I'm fine. I wish you'd stop asking me."

"I'm just thinking of you, Owen."

"I know you are. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"Isn't there anything I can do?"

Goodhearted people can be very stupid sometimes. And the longer they stick around, the lousier they can make you feel.

"Unh-unh. Not that I know of."

"Owen, at one time your mother was one of the most beautiful women in Fleming. Why I remember when——"

"Are you sure you don't want some tea, Mrs. Kaywoodie?"

"Thank you very much, Owen. I guess not."

I yawned again. Almost right in her sad face, so that she couldn't help but get the idea. Sometimes she didn't seem very bright.

"I'm really knocked out," I said.

"You do look tired. I'd better leave and let you go to bed."

"I'm sorry you have to rush off like this. Thanks very much for stopping over, Mrs. Kaywoodie. I hope you do it again soon."

"I shall, Owen. That's a promise."

"Well, I hope so."

"You can depend on it."

"Good, I'm glad. Thanks a lot for the cake, too."

I opened the door for her.

But she wasn't ready to leave yet. Not her! You see, I don't think Mrs. Kaywoodie is really good-natured at all, because the only time she's every happy or polite is when you're sick or dying. Then she's a queen.

She turned to me and smiled.

"Mr. Kaywoodie and I would like to have you and your father over for dinner next Saturday. Would you like that, Owen? If you can come around five for cocktails, that'll be fine. I suppose you're old enough for a martini—a weak one at least."

She gave me one of those coy grins that old women love to use all the time. It didn't fit her at all. Her upper plate slipped out of place a little, and there's sure as hell nothing coy about that.

"I could drink a weak one, I guess."

"Wonderful! I'll make you one myself and put two olives in it!"

"Boy!" I said.

"Now be sure to come, won't you?"

"Sure, I don't see why not," I said. And then I got this idea. It's not that I hate her really, but there's nobody in the world I'd rather irritate, except Bill maybe. She's probably okay when she's asleep, but when she's awake she's a real terror. She'll tell you the same story five hundred times and expect you to keep listening to it, and the worst thing is, she doesn't remember she's told it to you before. She's so stuck on herself she doesn't know who she's talking to half the time. I hate people like that, and I just have to irritate them. I'd rather drop dead than tell somebody the same story twice.

"Listen," I said, "is Mr. Cannon coming?"

She looked at me like I'd just called her the world's crummiest bastard.

"Of course not! Why?"

"Oh, I was just wondering. No reason. The old guy must get pretty lonely living alone. He'd probably love to come."

"Well, love it or no, he certainly is not invited."

She was P Od, I'm happy to say.

I walked out on the porch with her.

"It's warm out," I said.

"Yes, it certainly is, Owen. It's unseasonal actually. So you'd better not be running around in a T shirt."

She gave me another big fat coy grin when she said that. Boy, she sure didn't give up easy! I guess after driving way over from the other side of town in the old Caddy, she figured she had to have a big scene or tears or something like that. I kept smiling, though.

"You can always tell when summer's approaching," she said. "Those Hollywood people come in with that ghastly roller skating show. Did you see it this year, Owen?"

"No, I missed it. But I saw it last year. It's really quite a show, Mrs. Kaywoodie. They have a lot of beautiful girls skating around."

"Oh, do they really? How interesting."

She wasn't interested at all. She was bored. I was interested, though.

"It was a lot of fun," I said. "All the girls wore tights, and they had a very good band that played while they skated. And this one girl—boy, you should've seen this one girl, Mrs. Kaywoodie. She looked just like Lana Turner only bigger—she was built bigger, I mean. Bigger, sort of."

She didn't seem to know.

"Not fatter or anything like that, Mrs. Kaywoodie. Bigger. You know what I mean—bigger in all the places that would look good if you were wearing tights and a sweater."

"I see," she said.

But she didn't see at all. She gave me a look that meant she wouldn't be seen dead in tights and a sweater.

I was getting excited; I was really irritating her.

"And she wasn't only built—built well, I mean—she could skate, too. And she didn't have to worry if she fell down either.

The way she was built her face would have never reached the ground."

I thought that was a very funny description, but Mrs. Kaywoodie didn't think so. Real quick she pulled a compact out of her purse and powdered her nose, like she was trying to powder away what I'd said.

"I have to run now, Owen."

Her voice was frigid as all hell.

"That's too bad," I said. "Thanks for stopping over. And thanks a lot for the cake."

"It was nothing," she said.

We stood looking at each other.

"Sure it was," I said. "It won't go stale either. I love chocolate cake."

She didn't smile.

"Be sure and leave some for your father."

"Oh, I will," I said.

"It has a dozen eggs in it," she said. She looked out at her car. "I just hate this unseasonal weather."

"It's pretty crummy."

"Well, good night," she said.

"Good night," I said smiling. "Thanks again for stopping over."

"Oh, it was nothing," she said.

"Well, good-by." I shouted, as she walked across the lawn out to the curb. "Have a nice drive home."

She didn't answer me, and after she drove away I went back inside. I was feeling hungry as hell so I took the cake into the kitchen, and grabbed a kitchen knife off of that deal you hang them on above the stove. I sliced all the chocolate frosting off the cake and put it on a plate, and threw the dough part away. I hate the dough part and my old man doesn't like cake at all, so there wasn't any sense in saving it. I had a glass of milk with the frosting. It was pretty good frosting, but I'd had better. After I finished I just sat around the house waiting for everybody to come back from the church.

Then this thing happened that still bothers me when I think

I walked along very fast, and the night was clouding up and getting even hotter. I felt like I was inside a clothes closet. The moon was half full and the sky was gray and you could see black

clouds going across the sky like hearses on a stormy day. It would rain pretty soon. My head was spinning like mad. Not that what had happened amounted to anything, but I wondered if hearing those strange sounds over the telephone meant I was going out of my mind. You couldn't tell. You were always reading about cases who started going nuts by hearing noises that weren't there and stuff like that. I ran the last two blocks to Barbara's house.

I was so nervous that I didn't even stop to think that I hadn't washed and that my fingernails were all dirty, and that my hair was hanging all over my face. I didn't give a damn. This chubby maid answered the bell, and I told her I wanted to see Barbara. She looked at me like I was a goddam burglar or Jack the Ripper. She didn't invite me in or anything. When Barbara came to the door I asked her right away if she'd go for a walk with me, and I must have looked very wild because she asked me what was wrong. I said I had to talk to her, so she said to wait a minute while she got her coat, and after she got her coat we started walking east toward Grand River.

We talked a little on the way over to the Grand, but it seemed to be a big strain on both of us. Just then I couldn't think of a single stupid thing in the world to talk about. Once there was a heavy roll of thunder and we talked about the weather for a while—about how it was raining all the goddam time. You can talk only so much about the weather, though. I began whistling a whole bunch of songs at once.

"I'm awfully sorry about your mother," she said.

She said it just like that, and nothing I'd said led up to it. It was like the way thunder blasts out without you being able to see it coming so that you can get used to the idea of the blast. It made me very jumpy.

We were almost to the river. We passed some very beautiful houses and even in the dark you could tell the gardens were pretty and the lawns and hedges were very well trimmed. Barbara lived in the part of Fleming that looks nicest in the spring, because the people in her neighborhood, like in the Heatherwood district where I live, have a lot of flower beds and trees on their property

that bloom and bud when spring comes, and they make her part of town look very lovely. Everybody's loaded with money in Barbara's neighborhood.

When we got close to the Grand the wind got a little cooler and damper and we could feel it on our faces. We had to walk down a steep hill to get to the edge of the river, and the hill was sort of craggy and there were loose rocks all over the place.

"It's so dark."

"Be careful," I said, "you don't want to fall."

"I'm afraid to take a step. There might not be anything there."

"Hold my hand. You'd better."

I walked very slowly. I didn't care whether we ever got to the bottom or not.

"There," she said. "We made it. Oh—my—I'm out of breath."

"You are?" I said. "I feel great. I thought we might try some jitterbugging. D'you want to jitterbug a little?"

"I'm not too keen on it, kid," she said, smiling. "I'll bet you can't anyhow."

We walked along the bicycle path by the edge of the river.

"Why d'you say that? What makes you think I can't jitterbug?"

"You're too tall and clumsy."

"Clumsy! Why, listen, I'm grace personified. I have the goddam grace of a bird in flight. My grace is like the imperial eagle's, young woman!" I began jumping up in the air and clicking my heels together, and I tried to spin around on one heel. "I'm doing the Fred Astaire," I shouted. "I made it up." I got dizzy spinning around and I almost fell flat on my face. "You see how wrong you were?" I asked her.

"Why you're even clumsier than I thought possible."

"That's what you think," I said. "You just don't know what real grace is." I flopped down on the ground and pressed my elbows into my stomach. "Watch this. I'll show you the trick of the year." I waited until she was really watching and then I slowly raised myself up so that I was parallel with the ground and I kept balancing like that for about thirty seconds. It really impressed her. "That's not *all* I can do. I'll show you a trick that takes unheard-of muscu-

lar co-ordination!" I took a pack of matches and laid them on the ground. Then I squatted down with my knees out, pressed my elbows between my knees and slowly began to rise up off the ground, and after I nearly blew my stack I managed to pick up the matches off the ground with my teeth. Barbara clapped. My head was throbbing, but I tried not to act too dizzy. "I guess you were wrong about me," I said.

"You almost fell in the river twice," she said. "I admit you're pretty fancy, though."

"I did not almost fall in the river."

"Yes you did. When you did that Fred Astaire thing you stuck one foot in the water. Look"—she pointed at my leg—"you got your trousers all wet."

"That's not water, you dope, that's sweat. I always sweat down there. I'm peculiar that way, is all."

"You're peculiar all right," she said, laughing. Then, laughing even harder, she said, "But I guess girls aren't supposed to laugh when boys do their tricks, are they? I guess boys aren't too keen on that."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not boys. You can laugh if you want to."

We were walking along the edge of the river again.

"Look," Barbara said. "Look at those men working."

We sat down on a bench next to the Grand canoe cabin where some men were hauling canoes out of winter storage. They had lights on all around the cabin. Some of the men were stripped to the waist and they all looked very brawny. I wondered if I'd ever be brawny like those guys. I told myself I didn't really give a good goddam one way or the other.

"I wonder why they're working so late?" she said. "It seems like a funny time to work."

"You've got me. I mean it does seem like a funny time."

"Perhaps they don't work in the daytime because they're too busy renting out canoes to people."

"Maybe that's it. I don't think so though. I don't think they start renting out canoes until May."

"Really? That's silly, isn't it? The weather's so beautiful these days—they must be losing a lot of money. Someone should tell them it's nice out."

"It's not usually this warm in April," I said. "The weather's very unseasonal."

"Unseasonal?" She looked at me. "That's a funny remark for you to make. Old people usually say that. I know as my father gets older, everything becomes more unseasonal to him."

"I just heard an old person say it," I said remembering Mrs. Kaywoodie.

But Barbara hadn't heard what I said. She was watching the men with the canoes. We watched them take a canoe out of storage and carry it down to the river. They floated the canoe in the river, for leaks and stuff I guess, and it made a flat slapping sound in the water. After the canoe was clean they carried it back to where they had the lights rigged up, and a guy air-hosed it inside and out. Then another guy came around with a bucket of paint and started painting it. They worked very fast and as they worked they were talking and laughing, so they must not have minded working so late at night.

"If I worked this late I'd have to get paid a lot."

Barbara didn't answer me.

We sat watching them for a while. Barbara seemed very wrapped up in those guys and I wondered what she was thinking about. She really struck me as being sort of a strange girl; like Herby's sister Mary, smart and dumb at the same time. She was very interested in poetry and music and all that stuff, but every time she said something it didn't seem to make too much sense.

She turned to me very suddenly.

"I did it!" she shouted.

That's what I mean. Maybe a screw loose somewhere.

"What did you do?"

"I just wrote a four-line poem in my head. I've been trying to do that for a long time." She looked at me very seriously. "Listen—are you very keen on poetry?"

"Sure I am."

"I'll tell it to you then."

She cleared her throat and looked up at the sky.

"In the dark night hid; sitting alone am I.
From my bench I watch men walking by.

In the night so thick, no man can me spy:
We watch men working, the white moon and I."

"You mean you just made it up? Just like that?"

"Well, to tell you the truth I cheated a little. I'm interested in oriental poetry, and this thing sounds like a lot of theirs. Did you like it?"

"Yes—but why wasn't I in it?" The goddam moon was in it. That isn't fair."

"That shows you how much you know," she said with a guilty smile. I was beginning to notice that every time you made fun of her she got a guilty smile on her face, whether she was guilty or not. "It happens that you were in it. I made you a symbol. You were the white moon shining in the night. Art isn't life, you know."

While she was talking there was a loud clap of thunder, and then a string of chain lightning lit up the sky.

"What'd you say?"

"I said Art isn't life."

"That's probably the trouble with it," I said. "Maybe that's why I can't believe most things I read."

She looked at me for a long time. I wondered if she was writing another four-line poem.

"You know something? You're funny. I'd say you're really much smarter than you act most of the time. I've watched you around school. Most of the time you act childish, but I don't really think you are. You're definitely not like Bill Butler."

"What about Bill?" I said. I was really interested.

She blew the hair out of her eyes.

"To tell the honest and brutal truth—he's not very smart. In fact he's an idiot. Like so many of those good-looking boys who love games. I'm not too keen on that type, and I never have been."

She looked out at the river, and I looked at her. "He kept calling after I didn't want to see him any more," she said, turning to me. "He's persistent. I'll say that for him. Anyhow, I got tired of giving him excuses. It was too boring. So finally I told him I was going steady."

"Well, aren't you?"

"No." She laughed. "I wouldn't do that."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"It's just not my cup of tea."

"But wouldn't you ever go steady?"

She gave me kind of a dirty look.

"You ask a lot of questions," she said.

"But Bill told me you were going steady. With a guy named Chester."

"I just told him that to discourage him." She began biting her fingernails. "Now you know, and you'll probably run right to Bill and tell him."

"No, I won't. I'm not his friend really."

"Well, I thought you were."

"We just run into each other a lot, is all. Our folks used to be good friends." I put my arm around the back of the bench without touching her. I looked out at the river. "Well," I said, "it's interesting to know you're not going steady."

She turned to me and held her lower lip with her finger and thumb. I noticed she did that when she got excited.

"You know Thomas Miller, don't you?"

"Pooch Miller? Sure, he's a friend of mine. At least most of the time." She sure loved to change the subject.

"Well, I dislike him very much."

"Why?" I said.

"He's one of the rudest boys I've ever met."

Also when Barbara got excited her mouth wiggled all over the place, and her forehead became very wrinkled. I felt a drop of rain on my hand.

"I didn't know you knew him, Barb."

"I was studying with Mary Tubbs one night at her house, and he was visiting her little brother——"

"Little brother! What d'you mean little brother? Herby's as old as I am."

"Yes, but you must be pretty young. You're a year and a half behind me in school."

"I'm sixteen and a half," I lied. "How old are you?"

"I'll be seventeen the day I graduate. June the tenth." She looked at me and squinted her eyes a little. "If you're sixteen and a half why aren't you in the eleventh grade?"

"I was a sickly boy," I said. "I was a blue baby." That didn't sound too convincing, so I said, "How come you're graduating at seventeen? That's a little young, isn't it?"

"I started school at four," she said. She leaned back against the bench and stuck out her tongue. "Hey, it's beginning to rain. I can feel it on my tongue. We'd better go, buster."

"Okay," I said, wondering why the hell she couldn't call me by my name. "But first tell me about Pooch. Why don't you like him?"

"He's terribly rude, that's all." She gave me a dirty look as if I'd just opened my fly or something.

"Pooch is usually a very polite guy," I said.

Barbara stood up.

"That's hard to believe. Really, he was stupid. He kept making nasty remarks about my being an honor student—and how sexless all honor students are. There wasn't any need to do that. Mary felt awful. And he kept telling dirty jokes."

"Does that bother you?" I said.

"Not especially," she said, "only they weren't very good anyway. He was just telling them to bother me. I'd heard them all, but I didn't let on." She smiled that guilty smile again, like she'd just broken into her grandmother's cookie jar. "He certainly wasn't up my alley."

"He isn't really so bad," I said.

We began walking up the hill. The lightning was coming more often and the rain was beginning to fall more steadily and the

moon was covered with clouds so that the night was blacker than ever. The men weren't working any more.

"Let's walk over to the bridge," I said. "It's too dark to climb the hill."

"Okay."

We passed the canoe cabin and walked along the bicycle path by the edge of the river for a couple of hundred yards, and then we walked onto this little wooden bridge that the river flowed under about fifteen feet below. We walked to the center of the bridge and it creaked under our feet. We stopped at the center and leaned on the flimsy wooden rail and looked down at the river. We couldn't see anything but we could hear the dark water flowing by. Barb leaned way over.

"I'd like to spit," she said. "It might make me feel less like a prude."

She didn't though, and as she leaned over like that I got this sudden urge to kiss her. Her neck was very long as she leaned over like that, and she seemed too tall for a girl, and I noticed that her eyes seemed to pop a little when you looked at her profile. But she had a beautiful nose, a beautiful little nose that was pugged a little. "If I weren't a girl I'd swim here naked in the summer." I leaned in closer to her on the rail. "Maybe I will anyhow," she said.

"Barb——?"

She turned and looked at me.

"Barbara, do you mind if——?" I tried to kiss her, but she turned her head away without saying a word. She seemed very embarrassed.

"Say, listen to that thunder!" she said. "It's going to rain sheets in a minute. Come on, kid." She started running. "I'll race you for two blocks," she shouted back to me.

We ran out to the street, and at first I thought I'd let her beat me, and then I decided to beat her by as much as I could. I ran like hell. By the time I got to Jefferson Street she still had almost a half a block to go.

Suddenly the stupid rain began to come down in buckets.

"Come—on. We'd better—run the—rest of—the way." We were both really out of breath but we ran the six blocks to her house. I didn't know how drenched I was until we got to her house and ran up to the porch.

"Wait a sec, I'll get you a raincoat. You can't go home in this the way you are."

"I don't need a raincoat," I said.

"Daddy's got an extra one. Just wait."

She brought me back this raincoat that three of me could've got into. I rolled up the sleeves so I could see my hands, and folded the extra raincoat around my stomach so I could tie the belt. There was over a foot of extra raincoat.

"Your dad must be on the large side."

"He's a giant."

Then she started giggling like crazy. I saw this guy, her old man I guess, looking out the window at us with a big smile on his puss. I felt strange as hell standing there like that.

"You should see yourself," she said. "You look like a clown in the circus. All you need to do is that Fred Astaire now."

"I'm not in the mood," I said.

"You should be. You should do it now. You look so comical—really you do."

I looked down at the raincoat. The goddam thing hung down to my ankles.

"Your dad must be thirteen feet tall."

"He's six-four in his stocking feet. He was the center on Harvard's basketball team when he was there."

"Is that him in the window?" I asked her.

"No," she said, "that's my brother."

"Your brother! He looks pretty old to be your brother."

"He's thirty-three," she said. "He's my half brother actually."

"Oh," I said.

"You'd better run while you've got a chance. It's let up a little."

"I guess I'd better."

I walked over to her and stuck out my hand. We shook hands. That was the second stupid time we'd shaken hands. I smiled in

the direction of the window, like the rain and everything was a big farce. I didn't want her goddam brother to think I couldn't take a joke.

"Good night. Thanks for the raincoat."

"Good night, kid. Don't catch cold."

I started down the steps and then she yelled at me.

"Hey, you came over to tell me something, didn't you? Or talk about something. You forgot. What was it?"

That's right. I'd forgotten all right. I'd forgotten about everything. I didn't remember running out of the house earlier and how scared and lonely I'd felt. And the funeral seemed like it had happened so long ago that it was all dim in my mind now. It didn't really seem like I'd gone to my mother's funeral at all that afternoon. It didn't really seem like it had happened at all.

It began raining even harder. I put the flap of her old man's raincoat over my head.

"Nothing important," I said. "I can't even remember now. I guess it wasn't very important, Barb."

"Well," she said, "you'd better run home. I wouldn't be too keen on going any further in this myself."

"Good-by," I said.

And I heard her say good-by to me as I went running down the street. You know, that's very queer. I'm not a great guy for self-torture or anything, but the farther I ran, the greater I got to feeling. I was sprinting along like a maniac and talking to myself and everything.

I ran all the way home.

14

Everybody was back from church when I got home, and my old man was P Od because I left church like that. He didn't say anything with everybody around, but I could tell he was angry. Every time he looked at me he raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips. As soon as I could I said how tired I was and went up to bed.

I couldn't go to sleep for one hell of a long time, though. I could hear voices downstairs. My heart was beating like crazy. I hadn't run so much since that time me and Pooch got chased out of the

Catholic cemetery by the caretaker. We were about ten then, and listened to all those wild horror shows on the radio, and we thought there were live people inside of those mausoleums. We figured if we hung around long enough they'd make some sort of noises or something. When this goddam caretaker came by I was rattling the lock on this mausoleum, and he must have thought we were trying to break in because he yelled his stupid head off. We ran like hell, and we didn't stop running until we got home either. But I was ten then. You're in a whole lot better shape when you're ten.

I lay in bed thinking about mausoleums and things like that, and my heart wouldn't stop beating fast. After a while I heard the clock downstairs strike twelve. I'd been lying in bed almost an hour without being able to go to sleep. At least I didn't have to go to school the next day, seeing it was Saturday—that was something. I got up and lit a cigarette, and after I smoked it down a ways I got very sleepy and put it out. Then I lay back and listened to the rain outside, and pretty soon I started wondering what Barbara's bedroom looked like. All I could think of were pink walls, and after that I must have gone off to sleep.

Then I had this real crazy dream. I usually can't remember my dreams, but this one was so crazy I'll never forget it.

Downstairs on the mantelpiece above the fireplace, my old man keeps a lot of book ends. Two of them are made out of wood; one is painted orange and the other one's white, and they both are flat on two ends and circular in the back, and on these flat ends there are steps cut into the wood that go up to the top. Well, at the beginning of the dream I'm standing at the bottom of a mountain that's shaped just like the white book end, and on the first step is a woman in an apron. All I can remember is this checked apron. I yelled to her to wait for me; I wanted to talk to her about something, and I started climbing up to the first step. When I got up there she was standing on the *second* step, and she couldn't seem to hear me when I yelled to her. Every time I climbed a step she was one ahead of me. She was always looking toward the top of the mountain. After we climbed a few more

steps like that I got really frantic and I screamed my head off at her, but it didn't do any good. I was climbing faster and faster, but she was always one step ahead of me. And then we got up so high there were clouds all around. Big white thick clouds that almost choked me. I lost her for a second; I couldn't see her. Boy, I almost went out of my head! I screamed at her to wait for me; I told her I couldn't see her any more. And then the clouds went away. I noticed she was two steps ahead of me, and she wasn't wearing an apron any more. She had on a long flowing white gown, and she was moving faster and faster. Then she was three steps ahead of me, then five or six, and pretty soon I lost sight of her altogether, and I just stood there screaming my head off. The next thing I can remember, I was standing on the mantelpiece next to the two book ends. I looked down at the carpet on the floor. The floor looked like it was a million miles away, and I jumped off the mantelpiece. I was falling through space with a very strange feeling in the pit of my stomach when I woke up.

I was sitting up in bed and my father was looking down at me.

"You must have had a nightmare," he said. "You were screaming."

I rubbed my eyes.

"What'd I say?"

"You said something about she couldn't go away, and she should take off that dress." My old man looked very frightened. I was pretty sure by the way he was looking at me that he thought I'd been dreaming of mom.

"I can't remember dreaming anything," I said.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. The smell of liquor was enough to knock you out, but he didn't seem too drunk. He started taking off his tie.

"Is everybody gone?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said, "except your aunt Agatha. She's flying to Florida in the morning, so I made reservations for her at the Olds tonight." He looked at me. "They were very sorry that you didn't stay for services——"

"I couldn't, Dad. I just——"

"That's all right."

He kicked off his shoes. He sounded sort of hurt and angry.

"I should think you would want to be with your father on a night like this. It isn't easy. It certainly isn't easy."

I didn't say anything.

"I was hounded by your aunt Emilie all evening," he said. "Your uncle Henry's in trouble again." He threw his coat at the chair. "Or, as she puts it so genteely: 'Henry approbated some faulty securities again.' That means I'll have to loan him some money, which won't be a loan at all but an out-and-out gift!"

"That's too bad," I said.

"Well, I'm only doing it because Henry's married to your mother's favorite sister. I've helped him out for years. As a businessman he's a preposterous fool who can't count up to ten, Owen, and he thinks I'm made of money." My old man lit a cigarette and his hands were really shaking. "This is the last goddam time I'll ever help him out."

"Maybe that's best," I said.

My old man sat on the chair near my bed, smoking. He kept taking deep inhales before any smoke had come out or anything.

"Dad, do you want to sleep in here with me, tonight?" He'd taken off his shoes and coat and tie, and I thought maybe he wanted to. Boy, he looked lonely sitting there smoking! I had a double bed, and there was plenty of room for both of us.

"I don't want to put you out, old man." He sounded almost shy.

"There's plenty of room for both of us."

"All right, I'd like to if you're sure I won't be a bother."

"You won't be," I said.

"I don't take up too much room," he said.

"Neither do I."

He went into his room and got a pair of pajamas, and washed up in the bathroom, and then came back.

"Let me sleep next to the wall," he said. "I always go to sleep on my right side."

"Okay."

When he got in bed I turned off the light.

Neither of us could go right to sleep. It was still raining pretty hard outside.

"What time was it when you got back from church, Dad?"

"A little after nine."

"Oh," I said.

"Where did you go?" he said.

"I went for a walk."

"That's good," he said.

We lay there without talking for a while, but I knew he hadn't gone to sleep. You can just tell things like that.

"Dad?"

"What is it, Owen?"

"I did something when I got home tonight. I hope you don't mind."

He turned over on his back.

"What did you do?"

"Well, I got worried about Paul. I got worried about him. I know you've written him and everything, but I went and sent him a telegram. They said it wouldn't cost much." I was waiting for him to say something, but he didn't. "I hope you don't mind."

He didn't answer me for at least a minute.

"I'm glad you did that, Owen. As a matter of fact," he said, turning over on his left side, "I hadn't got around to writing him yet."

"You hadn't?"

"No. I know I should have——" he broke off and cleared his throat. "Owen—old man—you didn't by any chance sign my name to the telegram too, did you?"

I had to think about what to tell him. I didn't want to make a mistake.

"Yes," I said. "I signed your name, too."

He touched my arm.

"That was very good of you."

Then he turned around on his right side, and I closed my eyes very tight and tried to go to sleep. But I couldn't. A million thoughts were racing around in my mind.

"Dad?" I said quietly.

He didn't answer.

"Dad?" I said a little louder.

"Yes, Owen, what is it?"

"I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No," he said.

"I just thought of something else. Mrs. Kaywoodie stopped over when I got home from church and invited us to her house for dinner next Saturday. D'you want to go?"

"Do you?"

"No—I don't think so."

"Neither do I," he said.

"But if Herby Tubbs's folks ask us over, will you go?"

"Of course," he said.

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

"I want to," he said.

"Fine," I said. "Good night, Dad."

"Good night, Owen."

I didn't go to sleep right away, but I heard my father snoring a little. I wondered if he really would have dinner at Herby's house or if he was just saying it. I decided it didn't make any difference as long as he said he would. That was the important thing.

And then I went to sleep.

During the night sometime I sort of woke up. My father was crying, and he kept saying "Oh, Owen—your mother" over and over again. I think he was asleep, though, because when I said something he didn't answer. He held my hand for a while, and then I finally went back to sleep.

15

Three weeks later I got this long letter from Paul. I'd come home from school to eat lunch and I read part of the letter while I was eating, and I finished it as I walked back to school.

Dear Owen:

This is the most difficult letter I've ever had to write in my life. Words don't come easy. I'm still shocked by the news of mother's death. It's hit me so quickly and so hard I may not get used to the idea

that she's gone for a long time. I can believe it in my mind, but I find it so very hard to believe in my heart.

There is no leave where I am at present; if there were such things as passes and bars and women for sale, I should have probably drunk myself into a stupor and stayed drunk for a week or so, and contracted one of the many occupational diseases. There is a variety of diseases in my present (thank God temporary!) occupation of mankilling, Owen: the most important, of course, being mankilling. For the lack of any diversion at all, I just sat quiet and tried not to think of mother too much. I just sat there and tried to stare through everything and everybody around me, trying to keep my mind away from home. Nobody, of course, paid any attention to me. They let me feel badly in peace, and I believe some of the men even respected me for being able to feel what they could no longer feel, just so long as I kept it close to myself and didn't burden them with it. Anyhow, Owen, my feelings for mother were deeper than I can say. I loved her more than I can ever tell you, or the woman I shall someday probably marry, or even myself, and this sort of love is very painful. That my love for mother is even deeper than my loathing for this war I'm in is as close as I can come to expressing myself.

So you sent the telegram! I didn't mean to write you about this, but I feel that I can't let it pass in silence. I have just received a very humble letter from dad in which he apologizes for his failure of nerve. It was good of him—almost noble of him—to at least give you the credit for sending the telegram. I know that it is not my place to prejudice my own brother against his father, so I shall try and keep my mouth shut if humanly possible, Owen. But don't misunderstand me, please. I don't hate dad—he has always been terribly distraught, for instance, by his failure to be a better husband and a more loving father—it's just that he never could pull the wool over my eyes. His sympathies on all subjects are always confused (usually with the help of liquor) because he has true sympathy and regard only for himself. To be corny, his heart has never beat for other people—for mother in particular. I don't want you to think he hates me, Owen, but I'm not at all sure that he doesn't. Let me end this whole unhappy subject by saying that when the war is over I won't be coming back to Fleming to live. I wouldn't fit in. I would sit in the rocking chair (do we still have it?) on the front porch and rot. My world isn't Fleming's world any more. I'm not going to

have a lot to say to those pretty young girls who never left home, and who thought the war was something made in Technicolor out around Culver City. I know a lot more than I used to, Owen, and Fleming is now too small to satisfy me. Period. Period. Period.

Now the happier side of the news—what there is of it. As you already know, and probably learned before I did, the war is over in Europe. Perhaps before long the war will be over on this side and, if my luck holds, I shall be able to come home intact. A rumor was born just after the Europe news (a healthy birth which is spreading to life-sized proportions) that the war will be over soon and we will be home on points before you can say General (dugout Doug) MacArthur. This, I'm afraid, is the extent of my good news.

I can't tell you where I am, but I can certainly tell you what it's like. It's hot here and it rains all the time. The land is malaria-ridden. Swamps everywhere. Mud everywhere. Death behind every bush. We're all exhausted inside out, and the mess the world's got itself into seems mad and futile to all of us who have to fight it, when we get time to think about it, which is almost never. Sometimes on a maneuver I think of you. I wonder what you're thinking and learning in school. Is it possible that you aren't learning any more about the doubtful ways of the world and the amoral heart of man than I learned six years ago? I suppose it's very possible. I'm not sure that school is where you learn anything important anyhow. You'll most likely learn soon enough, once the pleasant society of school is behind you. But I do wish you would begin to ask yourself one question, Owen, and then slowly try to answer it. Is this the best of all possible worlds?

Give my best to dad. Tell him I'll write him soon. And for God's sake don't show him this letter!

Love, Paul

P.S. I have just read over this letter, and I now wonder if I'm not basically just as weepy a personality as I think dad is. Who can say? After all, he was in the first war and he is my father.

I have a feeling I haven't quite been fair to him. I do love dad, Owen, I really do. I can't tell you why we're the way we are with each other, because I don't know: it's some goddam dark thing in both of us. But please, Owen, disregard anything bad I've ever said about him. Judge for yourself. I mean this. Please don't think that he had anything to do with mother's death because it isn't true. I want you to take care of the

old man, and see that he doesn't drink too much. He needs you right now more than he ever needed me, and you can do more for him than I could ever do. I guess I'm trying to say that he's your responsibility.

Again my love,
Paul

I stuck the letter in my hip pocket and decided I'd better answer it that night. It worried me quite a bit. My brother was always very moody, and I wanted to let him know that everything was all right at home. Everything wasn't all right at home, but I wanted to let him know it was anyway.

I sat through school that afternoon dreaming up what I'd tell him. I even talked out loud to myself in Geometry class, which I do when I get excited, and when I looked up Mary Zeller and Jan Albright were laughing at me. I acted like they didn't exist. They ruined my concentration, though. I tried to think of things he'd written in the letter so I'd know what to answer him, but I couldn't remember a goddam word. So after a while I started drawing weird-looking airplanes on the inside of my geometry book.

At three-thirty I ran into Mr. Harris in the hall, and he said he wanted to see me after school the next day. He didn't look too happy or anything. He was wearing one of those seersucker jackets, and when I talked to him I looked at the stripes on the jacket instead of at his face. I wasn't too wild about having a talk with him—I was pretty sure it was about my feeble grades.

When I got home I found two dollars and a note from my father on the telephone stand. The two dollars were to go out and eat dinner with—he said he wouldn't be home until late. I stuck the two dollars in my wallet. I could use them to take Barbara to a movie with or something, and that was more important than blowing them on a stupid dinner. I had a couple of Velveeta cheese sandwiches and a quart of milk for dinner.

After that I put on some Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller records and began writing this letter to Paul. I started it about a million times before it began to sound right. I thought I'd tell him all that happened since the funeral three weeks ago, but I couldn't do that. I didn't want to worry him, seeing he was away in the war.

I decided not to tell him that dad was drinking more than ever, and that he never got in at night until about three in the morning. I would have told Paul about how Dad had spent the last three week ends in Detroit with Mr. Hart except that Paul can't stand Mr. Hart. When we were kids we used to want to pull his beard, and when he came over to the house we'd walk along behind him, imitating the way he jerked his head around when he talked. He always seemed to be walking around the room when he talked. He was very nervous. He inherited this law business from his old man and he's lousy with money. He's not lousy with brains, though. About the only thing he can do is swear with a Scotch brogue, and when he does that his beard flies all over the place. Every year or so he goes to Washington on legal business and once in a while my old man goes with him. When they get back they say they played squash with some of Hart's old school buddies, and that squash story is about as untruthful a lie as I've ever heard. When they get back they can hardly stand up. Once Mr. Hart didn't get back at all, and his wife, who used to be my mother's best friend, had to fly to Washington and get him. He was gone three months that time, and she found him through some friends of theirs. He was having a helluva lot of fun playing golf somewhere in Maryland. I remember how glad I was that my father hadn't gone on that trip. Anyway, seeing that he was spending all his time with Mr. Hart, I decided not to tell Paul much about what he was doing. I said that he was getting along okay.

I wanted to tell Paul about Barbara more than anything else. I told him I'd taken her out five times in the last three weeks, and that I'd called her thirteen times—fifteen really, but twice she wasn't home and I had to shoot the breeze with her very young stepmother. I told him what Barb looked like, and all the things I'd found out about her. The most important thing I'd found out was that her mother died of cancer when she was fourteen just like mom did. When she told me that, I was very sorry and everything, but I really felt better and less lonely than I'd felt in one hell of a long time. Barbara told me that that was her father's second marriage. The first time he got married, he married an older

woman who was wealthy when he was very young. He had a son—the guy I saw in the window—by her. And after Barb's mother died, he married this very young woman that I'd talked to on the telephone. Barbara told me that her stepmother was born the same year her half brother was. I don't know why, but I thought all this stuff would interest Paul. I know it sure did me. It seemed that for the first time in my life I'd met somebody who'd had it so much tougher than me it wasn't even funny. And I told Paul that I was trying to figure out how to get her to go steady with me.

Before I knew it I'd almost written him a whole book about all the things I'd done since I'd written him last. For the last six months I'd only said, "Hello, how are you? I'm fine. I hope you are," and all that stuff. When I finished I'd written ten pages.

After I mailed the letter I thought of all the things I hadn't told him about. I'd meant to tell him how me and Pooch had got to be sort of enemies, and that the only guy I could think of who wasn't P Od at me was Herby. But somehow I just couldn't tell him about that stupid stuff with him in the war. The most important thing of all that I'd wanted to tell him, I couldn't begin to talk about. That was about these dreams I'd been having nearly every night. They really scared the hell out of me. Almost every goddam night I'd have this same dream over and over again. It was about my mother. I'd walk into her bedroom and wouldn't be able to recognize her. And then somebody would come along—my father or Paul or one of my three thousand aunts—and tell me she was dead. I wouldn't believe them. At the end of the dream I would be sitting by her bed waiting for her to wake up. After about the fifth time I had the dream, I got so I could walk right in and pull myself out of it. I always pulled myself out at the very end, because that's when it got really bad. I didn't tell Paul anything about the dreams, though, or anybody else either.

That night was the first time in over two weeks that I didn't dream about her at all. I didn't dream about anything. Maybe that's because I thought about the dreams so much while I was writing Paul. Anyway, I felt great in school all the next day, and I even slapped Bill on the back and told Deacon he was looking

more like Alan Ladd every day, and acted like a real goddam booster. I wasn't even too worried about seeing Mr. Harris, but when I walked back to my home room at three-thirty I stood outside for a long time before I walked in. I wasn't too crazy about seeing Mr. Harris all of a sudden. Right while I was standing at the door I remembered I'd hardly seen him since my mother died. He'd been out of school all the week before with a cold, and the week before that I'd been out of school for the funeral and everything. The longer I stood there, the more I wished I didn't have to go in and see him.

Finally I just barged in, and Mr. Harris looked up from a whole bunch of papers he was leafing through.

"Be with you in a minute, Owen."

I just stood there like a dunce.

Then I asked him if he wanted the door closed and he said yes, so I closed it. I almost asked him if he wanted it locked too, but he didn't seem to be in a very happy mood.

"Have a seat," he said. I figured he meant the one beside his desk.

I sat down on that one. "Is your cold better, Mr. Harris?" That was a very stupid question. His nose was red as all hell.

"The cold's fine," he said. He spread his palms outward, like he always did when he was about to say something he thought was witty. "If the cold gets any better I'll end up in an oxygen tent." He had a big laugh over that one, and his nose started running like crazy. I managed to laugh a little myself, although it was sort of a strain. He wasn't nearly as witty as he thought he was.

"Well, Owen," he said, putting his pen down on the desk and leaning way the hell back in his seat. "Well, school's about over for the year."

"About three more weeks," I said.

"Three weeks and two days, to be exact."

"Boy, that's not long."

"You're right, Owen, it isn't." He put a pencil between his teeth and began chewing it. He rocked back and forth in the chair and it squeaked like hell.

"That's sure not long," I said. I tried to think of something else to say, but I couldn't. He was pretty quiet like he was waiting for me to say something big and important.

"Three weeks and two days'll fly by in no time," I said.

"Yes, Owen, they will." He started to say something else but his nose was too stuffed. He pulled out this snotty-looking handkerchief and blew the hell out of his nose. I kept waiting for it to bleed. After he put the handkerchief back in his pocket he pulled his chair in closer to the desk, and gave me one of these very worried looks that teachers love to use. They're very corny looks, like doctors love to use when they check your heart.

"I would like to help you, Owen," he said.

"What d'you mean, Mr. Harris?"

"You must realize that you're doing very badly. For instance in Geometry and Biology"—he looked through some stupid records that must have been mine—"if you don't pass those examinations, you could be kept back a year."

"I know that. I've meant to try har——"

"Look here, Owen—— Owen, I don't believe for one minute that it's all your fault." He was beginning to look very embarrassed. "You've been having trouble at home. . . . You were out the week before last. . . . Owen, I want you to know how sorry I am about your mother. . . ." He pulled out the snotty-looking handkerchief and blew his nose again.

I didn't look at him when he looked at me. I just wished like hell he wouldn't get sad with me like everybody else. It's the worst thing somebody can do to you; it makes you feel sadder than you felt in the first place. If they'd only laugh or do something silly.

"Now in all your other classes," he said very loudly, "you're doing all right. You'll pass them, anyhow. It's only Geometry and Biology that I'm worr——"

"I'm going to study very hard for those exams," I said.

"It's a little late in the year," he said.

"I know it. I can do the work, though."

"Mr. Forman says that you seem to have a difficult time with logic. You see, Owen, Geometry isn't easy for everyone. It hasn't

anything to do with your general aptitude, you know. I mean it hasn't anything to do with your general intelligence. It's just difficult for some minds to grasp. Perhaps if you'd let me help you _____"

"I can do it, Mr. Harris."

"Well, I don't know, Owen. You haven't showed any apititude for it. I mean you haven't showed any."

"I can get it," I said.

Mr. Harris drummed his fingers on the desk and looked at me in a funny way, like I was a stranger who'd just barged in on him. I wondered if he was P Od at me. He seemed very nervous the way he kept drumming his fingers. God, he made me nervous doing that!

"Look here," he said, "I could help you. I could spend the next few evenings with you, and we could do a lot of cramming." He took the pencil out of his mouth and began playing with the pen. "Your mother, Owen. She was sick for quite a while, wasn't she?"

"Yes she was," I said.

"That's too bad. It's a shame, it really is. At one time or another we all have to go through these crises, Owen. And no wonder your work has been affected by it."

"It hasn't," I said.

He gave me the old X-ray eye treatment—one of those I-can-see-right-through-you looks. Sometimes he talked like he wasn't a teacher, when there was something wrong and he felt he had to know you. He did that sometimes, because he was a pretty good guy. But it always made me uncomfortable, because he really was a teacher and he didn't know very much about you at all. *He* sure didn't know how I felt or he would have kept quiet.

"I don't understand," he said. "What did you say?"

"I said my work hasn't been affected by anything. I just don't like the work, that's all."

He got up from his chair.

"So you don't feel you need my help?" he said.

"I can do the work okay. I'll pass the exams."

"I hope you can, Owen. I hope so for your sake."

"I can do it all right," I said.

Mr. Harris walked over to the window and looked outside. He had his hands behind his back. All of a sudden he turned around and looked at me.

"I've gone to no little trouble to try and talk with you," he said. He looked at me with one stupid eyebrow raised. "Frankly you surprise me."

"Why, Mr. Harris?"

He was making me feel goddam uncomfortable.

"Your attitude is frankly—if you don't mind my being frank—quite hostile towards authority. Here I'm trying to help you, and you refuse to accept my help. I realize you may not be feeling _____"

"I'm sorry if I said something wrong, Mr. Harris. I really am. I'll listen to anything about my work."

He was really beginning to look P Od.

"All right. We'll get down to the facts." He walked back to his desk and sat down. He fiddled around with some yellow sheets that were probably my stupid records; it looked like he had a whole pile of them on his desk. He told me that Mr. Greenbaum, the principal, had told him to check up on me because I was liable to flunk. He said that if a student's never been kept back a grade before, the homeroom teacher has to check his records and talk to him. He said that it was just his job and that he had to do it, and that if I listened closely and kept my mind on what he said we could get through with the whole deal very quickly. He really looked angry.

"In junior high school you made the honor roll five times. Your total average through junior high school was eighty-nine per cent. *Eighty-nine per cent!*" he said. The way he looked at me I thought he was going to ask me if I'd paid off the teachers. He took out his handkerchief and blew his nose again. "I hate to tell you what your average is now. It's not good—I'll tell you that. You're doing very badly."

I stared at this half-rotten apple on his desk. I wondered if one of the hundred per centers had given it to him.

"I didn't do very well in the ninth grade, though," I said. "It's not only in high school I've done bad."

"Badly, Owen. Badly."

"Badly," I said. He was always correcting you instead of listening to what you said. "I did very badly in the ninth grade. Almost as badly as I'm doing now."

Mr. Harris looked at me for a long time and moved his lips like he was thinking of what to say next. He always took one hell of a long time to say anything, and when he did say something he said it so slowly you almost went to sleep. "Now, if you'll bear with me, we'll run quickly through your grades by years. In the seventh grade you did your best work. In the eighth grade you slipped slightly—not much, but a little. And then in the ninth grade—zoooooommmmm"—Mr. Harris made like a diving airplane with his hand; it looked sillier than hell—"your average dropped below eighty per cent. And since you've been in high school," he said, picking up one of the yellow sheets and squinting at it, "you've barely maintained a passing seventy-five." He laid the sheet on his desk. "That's the story, Owen."

"It's pretty bad," I said.

"Yes, it certainly is. And I'm supposed to find out why it's so bad. There must be a reason."

"The only reason is, I haven't studied."

"Yes, but why haven't you studied?" he asked me.

"I don't know. I don't like to study, I guess."

"Well, do you know why you don't like to study?"

"No," I said. "I don't know. The work doesn't seem to interest me."

He leaned way the hell back in his chair again. I thought maybe he'd fall on his head, but he didn't.

"What does interest you, Owen?"

"I don't know. A lot of things," I said. He was really making me nervous. "I like a lot of things."

He rubbed the sort of flabby skin on his cheeks and looked at me. "What kinds of things do you like?"

I wanted to tell him I like people to mind their own business,

but I couldn't do that. I started cracking my knuckles. He really made me jumpy. The trouble is, when somebody asks you what you like to do it's hard to think of anything. I kept trying, though.

"I like to go for long walks," I said.

He laughed like I didn't know what the hell I was talking about. "Everybody likes to walk," he said.

"No they don't. Not for miles and miles like I do."

He blinked at me with his fishy eyes. He was sort of a handsome guy, but he did have fishy eyes. After he spent about a minute trying to stare me down, he riffled through my stupid records again. I was dying for a cigarette. "On your intelligence quotient test," he said, "the one you took last semester, you did very well. One hundred thirty-one. That's really quite high, Owen. It places you definitely near the top of your class. And the interesting part is, you didn't do quite as well on your IQ tests in junior high school when you were getting better grades!"

He frowned at me like I was a goddam foreign spy.

"That's very interesting," I said.

"What d'you suppose the answer is?" he asked me.

"Well," I said, "maybe I've gotten too smart for school." Boy, that was the biggest mistake going! He stuck the chewed-up pencil in his mouth again and almost bit it in two.

"Owen—I'm not going to become personal. I don't believe that's my province. But if you'll permit me, I'd like to make a personal observation."

"I don't mind," I said. "Say anything you want."

"Well," he said. "after talking to some of your teachers, I've come to a conclusion. I think that you're unreasonable. You're very unreasonable." He folded his arms across his chest and stared at me. "You apparently never give anyone a chance to teach you. You seem to think that you're too wise to be taught. You disrupt classes whenever possible. Why, one of your teachers claims that you openly insulted her."

"Oh, I can tell you all about that," I said.

"You can——"

"That's Miss Reynolds," I said. "I had her last semester for English. She talked like a fascist."

"Like a *what*?"

"A fascist. She talked like one I mean." I told him how she seemed to be nuts about Hitler, and what a creep she thought Roosevelt was. He seemed interested so I told him about painting the mustache on my lip, and giving her the old "Heil Hitler" routine. He seemed to be kind of amused by the story, but the funny thing was, after I told it to him he didn't act like he wanted to talk to me any more.

He stood up, so I stood up too.

I started walking to the door.

"By the way, Owen . . ."

I turned around.

"I talked with your father on the phone yesterday. Did he tell you?"

"No, he didn't, Mr. Harris."

"Well, we had a good long talk. He seems like a swell fellow. Do you happen to know how awfully concerned he is about you, Owen?"

"I know. I know he's very concerned."

"He wanted me to talk to you. He felt that, perhaps, through me you might take more interest in your work. I was willing to try, but frankly you're not easy to talk to."

"I know that. I'm not easy to talk to." I stood by the door with my hand on the doorknob. I wished to hell he'd let me go.

"Your father's the one who suggested I might help you with the Geometry and Biology exams."

"My dad did that?"

"That's right. It was his idea."

"I thought that was something the school made you do, Mr. Harris. I thought they made you help somebody who's flunking."

"No. All we have to do is give you a pep talk."

"Did you tell my dad you'd help me?"

"I said that I'd talk to you about it."

He put on his coat and walked over to where I was standing by the door. He put his hand on my shoulder. That made me feel sort of funny, but I couldn't do anything about it. "Look here, Owen," he said, "would you like to reconsider?"

"You mean about you helping me?"

"That's right. Only, Owen, say 'your helping me' instead of you helping me.' It's about time you began to learn a few of the basic rules."

"I suppose my dad'll find out if you don't help me."

"I imagine so. He might ask you."

"Well, you can help me if you want to. I don't know why you'd want to, though."

He smiled, and when he smiled you thought there was something inside that made him do it. He made you want to smile. "I don't know why, either. I'm really quite lazy."

"Teachers aren't ever lazy, are they?"

"Sure they are," he said. "At least some of us are."

"Boy—that's a new one on me."

"Who else has a job with three months off in the summer?"

"I suppose that's one way of looking at it," I said. "Except you probably need at least three months after teaching guys like me."

He opened the door and made me walk out in the hall ahead of him. That's always very embarrassing to me—who should go first and everything. We ended up almost going through at the same time and killing each other.

We walked down the hall together.

"When d'you want to start with me?" I said.

"Tomorrow night after school," he said.

"I hope I'll be able to get it," I said. "I really expected to flunk both Geometry and Biology."

"You'll get it," Mr. Harris said. "That's one reason I'm interested in helping you. I have a feeling that potentially you're excellent college material."

"Me? What makes you think that, Mr. Harris?"

He laughed. "I'm not sure. I just have a hunch. Miss Reynolds

showed me some of your essays and, rough as they were, they showed a great deal of thought. And you mistrust many things about school, which I believe is the sign of a growing mind. You're pretty skeptical right now, and I don't happen to think that's bad for a young mind."

He was making me feel good. Nobody had ever talked to me that way before. As far back as I could remember people had said all kinds of things about me, but nobody ever told me I had any brains. He really made me feel very good, even though I thought he was feeling so expansive he would have given anybody he was with right then a snow job.

"Would you like to ride downtown with me? I've got the car in the parking lot."

"Sure," I said.

We walked over the cinder track where the guys knocked themselves out practicing for the five-mile cross-country runs and all that stuff, and passed the big baseball diamond, behind the school, and walked all the way back to the parking lot, way out past the furthest outfield bleachers. It was a hell of a long walk in the sun.

"Are you playing for the baseball game tonight?"

"Sure, the band plays for all the games."

"What's your instrument, Owen?"

"The sousaphone. That big deal that winds around your neck."

"I think I'll come to the game," Mr. Harris said.

"You should. It should be a good game. Eastern has a good team."

"I'll compare the bands," he said, smiling.

"Oh, don't do that. We stink next to Eastern."

"Well, at least you're honest about it—or else you're lacking in school patriotism."

"They always did have better bands than Cornell," I said. "A sad fact, Mr. Harris."

We got in his beat-up Ford convertible and drove downtown. He drove fast as hell, but he was a very good driver. He could swerve in and out of traffic very nicely like a taxi driver. We didn't seem to have any more things to talk about, except once he almost

rammed hell out of this new Buick that this woman who didn't know how to drive was driving, and we both got a large charge out of that.

16

After Mr. Harris let me out on the main drag I went over to the store and shot the breeze with Mrs. Kaywoodie for a while. It was Mr. Cannon's day off. About a quarter of five my father came in, and I asked him if he wanted to go to the ball game. It was kind of a silly question to ask him, seeing that he was even less crazy about sports than I was. He was a little loaded but not really drunk or anything. It was getting so that I didn't think about him being loaded unless he was really drunk, because he was about half drunk all the time. He said he couldn't make the ball game.

He was wearing a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and the front of his shirt was covered with dirt. A pair of cuff links were in his shirt pocket.

"Will you help me carry some books in from the car, Owen?" I walked out to the car with him, and in the trunk he had about fifty used books.

"Did you buy out a library, dad?"

"Yes," he said, "from Mrs. Turnbull. She's going to sell the big home and move into an apartment now that her husband's dead." He started arranging a stack of books to carry in.

"This isn't the whole library, is it?"

"No—I brought only the best ones along."

He dropped some books on the street. He got very clumsy with his hands when he'd had a few too many. I picked them up and put them on my own pile.

"Isn't she one of the richest people in town?" I said as we walked back to the store.

"Yes, she is," he said. "She's the wealthiest woman in town. You may not remember, Owen, but she once gave you a handful of quarters to put in the slot machine out at the Country Club." He smiled. "I give you credit for nerve—gambling like that in the depth of the depression."

"I don't remember that. How old was I?"

"Six or seven, I think."

"I'll bet I blew all the money, too."

"I think you asked her for more quarters and she wouldn't give them to you."

I held the door for him, and then we walked into the back of the store and put the books down.

"I hope you got away with murder," I said. "She can afford it."

"Well, I did and I didn't," he said. "She told me to take the whole lot for whatever I thought they were worth, and she obviously didn't know anything about books. I felt sorry for her."

He sat down on a chair in the back room and wiped the sweat off his forehead with his bare arm. He was breathing heavily.

"I sure wouldn't feel sorry for anybody as rich as her," I said.

"As rich as she, Owen."

"As she," I said. "I really wouldn't."

"Well, she's an old woman. Her eyesight is poor and her memory's failing. A woman in her condition, old man, is at the mercy of anyone who'll take advantage of her." He lit his pipe and began inhaling it like crazy. "She's an old woman with few friends, and she never leaves her house any more." He smiled at me again. "Now you wouldn't want me to cheat an old woman who's down on her luck, even if she does happen to be rich, would you?"

"She sounds very lonely," I said.

"Yes, she probably is. I certainly couldn't give her anything but a fair estimate."

"I could have," I said. "She's rolling in dough."

"That's not a very fair position, old man."

"I suppose not, Dad, but that's the way I feel."

"Well," he said, "you'll have a great career in business."

He started to get up.

"I'll get the rest of the books," I said.

After he marked the books he asked me if I wanted to go out to dinner. I told him that I had to be back at school to practice some formations by six-thirty, and that I thought I'd just grab a sandwich or something.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked me.

"How about Mike's? They'll give you a real bloody hamburger just like you like them."

I was surprised when he didn't put up an argument. Sometimes I think he'd rather starve than go into a greasy spoon, but he said it was okay by him. He told Mrs. Kaywoodie to lock up the store, and then he rolled down his sleeves and put his cuff links back on. We took off for Mike's.

We each ordered two hamburgers very rare, and before my father had finished his he'd drank four bottles of beer. He ate a lot slower than he drank. Mike's wasn't very crowded, and there was some old character trying to grab pig's feet out of the free lunch bowl. Mike got mad at him and told him to use the wooden fork, but the old guy seemed to be too drunk to understand. He kept grabbing the pigs' feet and stuffing them into his mouth, and finally Mike just shrugged and walked away. It's a very crummy place, all dark and smelly and the tables are always covered with crud, but I like the place. Mike makes the best hamburgers I've ever tasted. Finally this old guy quit eating and slammed the cover back on the free lunch bowl and staggered out into the street. Mike swore at him in Greek, but he looked like he was sort of laughing all the time, too. The old guy was really a character.

I ordered some lemon pie and milk, and my old man had another bottle of beer. He seemed very nervous about something, and he kept clearing his throat like he was going to say something, and then he wouldn't say anything. After a while he started getting me nervous, too. When I get too nervous I have to say something, so I told him that Mr. Harris was going to help me cram for the Geometry and Biology exams. I thought that would make him feel good, but the funny thing is, he didn't even seem to hear me.

"This is a terrible place," he said.

"The hamburgers are good, though, aren't they?"

"Yes, they're all right." He drank down the rest of his beer. He wiped off his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt. The shirt was really a mess.

"Well, I'd better be getting along pretty quick," I said.

I didn't want to be late for band rehearsal. Mr. Chambers told

me that if I kept being late for classes I wouldn't hold first chair next year.

"By the way, Owen, have you heard from Paul?"

"No, I haven't, Dad," I said, lying like all hell. "Why?"

"I just wondered. Perhaps you ought to write him a long letter. I'm sure he'd like to hear from you—probably more right now than ever."

"I wrote him yesterday," I said.

"You did?"

"Yes. I wrote him a very long letter."

"That's good," my father said. "We ought to write him more often. Your mother used to do the writing, you know—well, actually, I never did much writing."

"We'll write him a lot, Dad."

"We ought to," he said.

As I looked at him I noticed how much weight he was losing, and that his face was very gray. Even when he drank now his face stayed gray, and it used to turn all kinds of colors. He looked like he hadn't gone to bed in three weeks.

"Why don't you come to the ball game, Dad?"

"No I can't, Owen. I'm sorry. I have to meet Ted Hart at the City Club." He knocked the live ashes out of his pipe and lit a cigarette. And then he did something that almost made me drop dead. He held out the pack and offered me a cigarette. He did it very casually like he'd been doing it for years and, after I saw he wasn't joking, I took it just as casually. I didn't inhale, though. I didn't want him to get the idea I'd been smoking for years or anything like that. I even held it clumsily like I wasn't used to it. The funniest thing was, we didn't say a word. He just offered it to me and I took it, and that's all there was to it. And from then on I smoked in front of him all the time, but I didn't begin inhaling around him for a while. I sort of eased into it.

"Did you say you're going to the City Club tonight?" I said.

"Yes," he said. He crushed out his cigarette in the ash tray. Then he looked at me with a shy smile. "Would you mind, old man, if I spent a few weeks this summer in Texas? I need a rest

and a change. Your uncle Alden and his wife asked me down. I think he feels a sort of brotherly affinity with my sorrow."

"Texas? That sounds swell, Dad. Why should I mind?"

"Well, somebody has to stay at the house. And there's the store to consider—Cannon and Emy Kaywoodie have to have their vacations. And then there's you——"

"Say, Dad, I've got a great idea!"

"What is it? Watch out, Owen, you're bloodying your sleeve with ketchup."

He was right. When I get excited something like that always happens. I looked like I'd been drilled in the arm five times.

"What I started to say was, I know somebody who can fill in at the store this summer." I wiped off my sleeve. "While they're on vacations and all that. This person I've got in mind wouldn't ask for much pay, either."

"Well, I don't know, old man——"

"It's a great idea, Dad. This person knows the book business, too."

"Who is it?"

"Me," I said. "I could do it."

"You?" he asked me. He cocked his head to one side and squinted at me. "Are you joking?"

"Well, why couldn't I do it?" I said. "I know the stock as well as Mr. Cannon does. And Mrs. Kaywoodie's so nearsighted. . . ."

"It's not that you can't do it," he said, "but why on earth would you want to? You like your summers free."

"Oh, it wouldn't take all my time. Just a few hours here and a few there. And, besides, I wouldn't do it for nothing."

"I hope to tell you," he said, smiling at me a little. "Please don't think your father's the kind of man who'd cheat his own son. I was planning to give you an allowance for living expenses while I was away. Now I could add on to that—say, fifteen dollars a week."

"No, I don't want the money," I said. "I had something else in mind."

"What's your stipulation?" he said. "I absolutely refuse to hand over my insurance and bonds."

"Oh come on, Dad, I'm serious."

"Well, what's your plan?"

"You're going to leave the car here, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'd go by train."

"Well, while you're gone I'd like to use the car. That means getting a driver's license before you leave and everything. And you'll have to teach me. . . ." I held my breath while I waited for him to say he wouldn't let me do it. He didn't say anything, though. "Is it a deal, Dad?"

"It sounds to me as though I'm getting off easy."

"Then it's a deal?" I asked him.

"It's a deal," he said. "But you'll need money for gas and oil so I'll have to give you the extra fifteen a week anyway." Then he smiled at me sort of shyly. "What's behind all this?" he said. "A young woman, by any chance?"

"Well, in a way." I felt very embarrassed. "Not really, though. Yes and no."

I began to tell him about Barbara, but he didn't seem to want to hear. That's one funny thing about my father. He always gets very curious about something, and then when you start to tell him he doesn't want to hear about it any more.

He ordered another bottle of beer, and asked me if I wanted one. I said I'd have one if he didn't mind me drinking it down fast and then taking off. He said he didn't mind.

"I'm sorry I can't take you to Texas with me."

"That's all right."

"Say—how would you like to go to Europe with me after you graduate? That is, if the war's over. I could take you as a sort of graduation present."

"That sounds real great, Dad."

"It would be an excellent education for you."

"I'll bet it would be. What was it like during the first war?"

"Muddy," he said. "Muddy and grim. I never realized how lovely it could be until I went back. I revisited some of the places where I'd fought in Italy and France."

"When was that, Dad? When did you go back, I mean?"

"In 1922. A few months before Paul was born." He took a long drink of beer, almost skooling it.

"Mom didn't go, did she?"

"No, old man, your mother didn't go. She didn't want to then. I went over with Ted Hart. You see, both of us felt somehow that we might never have another chance—maybe another chance to be free and on the loose. We'd both fought in the war, and had been married only for about a year. We felt we had to go," he said. "Sort of a now-or-never proposition."

"Oh," I said.

"I always meant to take your mother," he said, "but there seemed to be so many things in our life together that were never done, or remained unsaid." He finished his beer, and I was drinking mine slowly so I gave him some of mine.

"There were many many times when I tried to talk her into going. I thought it would be so good for us. I'm certain it would have been good, but something always happened. Then one day, Owen, she just didn't care any more, and finally I quit talking about it." He smiled at me, and it was the sort of smile that's hard to watch because there were tears in his eyes. "I ought to have taken her in 1922. That would have been awfully good for us."

I nodded my head, and drank down the rest of my beer.

When I looked up he had a small white package in his hand, and his smile was a little happier.

"I nearly forgot," he said. He shoved the package across the table to me. "Happy birthday, old man. How does it feel to be sixteen?"

"Oh, about the same," I said. I tore open the package. Inside was a good-looking Elgin seventeen-jewel wrist watch. It was really beautiful. The band was silver and so was the long frame that curved in at the middle like an hourglass, and the face was blue. I put the watch on my wrist and wound it.

"What time is it, Dad?"

"Five minutes after six."

"It's really great. I love it."

"I thought it was pretty nice myself."

"Thanks a lot, Dad. It's great."

"If you have any trouble with it," he said, "tell me. I'll give Roger Banks hell."

"You bought it from Banks?"

"Yes. He's the only jeweler who carries this type of watch."

"Gosh, Dad, it's great. Thanks again."

"Now, Owen, take good care of it. Please try not to repeat your regrettable performances with the pen and pencils I've given you. Hold onto it for at least a month."

"I won't lose it. It won't leave my wrist."

"Except, I trust, while you're taking a bath. It's not a military watch."

"I'll be careful with it."

I looked at the watch and it said ten minutes after six. "Dad—I have to leave. I have to be back to school in twenty minutes."

He called over Mike and paid the check.

"You know," my old man said after Mike left, "we don't have the large and happy crowds we used to have on our birthdays. I'm sorry we can't spend the evening together."

"I'm sorry too."

"Perhaps we can spend tomorrow night together."

"Sure we can if you want to."

"You have to learn how to drive," he said. "We'll spend part of this week end on the first lesson."

"Okay," I said. I was getting nervous about being late.

"I'll write you regularly from Texas," he said. "You know, Alden owns a small newspaper down in Dallas. And even though he is a Republican he puts out quite a good paper, Owen. I don't think I'm prejudiced just because he's my brother. I'll send you up a few copies and let you judge for yourself——"

"Dad, I'm going to be late if I don't hurry."

"Well, you'd better go then."

I got out of my chair and zipped up my windbreaker.

"Thanks again for the watch, Dad. I really love it."

"I'm glad."

"Are you going to stay here?"

"I think I'll have one more beer."

"It's not really such a bad place, is it?"

"Well, Owen, I've seen better," he said, smiling, "and perhaps one or two worse." And then the smile was gone and he said, "You'd better go. I can see that you're going to be late if you don't go."

"Good-by, Dad."

"I hope your side wins the ball game," he said.

There wasn't a bus at the corner, so I walked very fast all the way to school. I kept looking at the watch every few seconds, but not to see what time it was. It was just so pretty to look at.

When I got to school I ran into the instrument closet and grabbed my sousaphone. Then I changed into my uniform. The uniform was white, with red stripes on the pants and the sleeves of the coat, and the hat was white with a red band around it. I always felt like a bellhop in the stupid uniform.

When I got outside again, Mr. Chambers was just beginning to call off the roll. I jumped into the back rank next to Perry Langley, and the big slob hardly gave me room enough to squeeze in, so I had to give him a good hard jab with my elbow.

"Hey, watch it, boozo," he said.

"Move your fat sloppy carcass," I said, and poked him with the side of my sousaphone. We didn't care for each other at all.

"Listen, fish face, you watch that crap," he said. "You wanna get clubbed?"

"Move it over, Langley. For crissake, move over!"

Mr. Chambers called my name. "Here," I yelled.

Everybody in the whole band yelled "Here" except my friend Langley. He had to yell "*Hooo*" like those tall, handsome, idiot sergeants do in those feeble war comedies about the Army. They're not comedies to Langley, though. He thinks they're on the level. He's so stupid he's a walking comedy. "Quit shovin, boozo," he said. "You ain't gonna be first chair much longer, turd face. You ain't gonna be, that's for sure." He grinned. He was really a stupid

bastard. "You're gonna be second chair like yours truly, and I'll be first chair."

"Why the hell don't you grow up, yours truly?" I said.

"I'm sicka bein second chair," he said. "I'm good enough to be first chair. I can play the horn better'n you, gravel brains."

"You're not second chair, Langley-Spanglely, old shoe, you're last chair!"

Boy, that annoyed the hell out of me! There were only us two in the band playing sousaphones, and the way Langley talked about first and second chairs you'd think there were at least seven thousand of us.

"Oh, come off it, pimples," he said. "Don't be such a stupid sorehead. Your trouble is, you can't take a joke."

"You tell me a joke," I said, "and we'll see if I can or not."

After that we didn't talk any more. We never talked to each other very much except to swear or something, and I'd already decided that next year I'd quit band and take gym so that Langley could be king of the sousaphone players, all by his miserable self. The thing I hated most about Langley was the way he kept making remarks about how rich my old man was; that really made me sore, although I never let him know it. It wouldn't have been so bad if he really was rich, but seeing that he wasn't it just showed what an idiot Langley was. He was a big snob about people with money.

When we marched out on the field for the game, the night had cooled off a little. We did a CORNELL formation and an EASTERN FLEMING formation, in the middle of the field, and then marched over to the pit, right next to Cornell's dugout. Every time we scored a run we were supposed to play the Cornell school song, but we might as well of come out on the field without our instruments because we got shut out with two hits; one bunt and a lucky Chinese liner out into center field. Eastern won seven to nothing.

After the game was over I got Al Mirowsky to lug my sousaphone back to school. He only played a flute, so he could handle it all right. And I ran out on the field and caught up with Barbara who was walking along with Herby and his sister, Mary.

"Hi, Herby," I said, "hi, Mary. Listen, Barb, can you wait for me while I get out of this uniform?"

"You look like a doorman," Barbara said.

"More like a bellhop," I said.

"No," Mary said, "you look just fine."

"We'll settle on fine doorman," said Herby, laughing.

I put my arm around Mary.

"Do you mind if I borrow Barbara?"

"You'd better ask me, kid," Barbara said. She was getting to call me kid a lot. I wasn't too wild about the nickname, but I didn't say anything.

"I'll only be five minutes."

"Well, I guess I can wait."

"I'm taking Mary to a movie," Herby said. "She's paying."

"It was shrewd of you to have a sister, Herby."

"Mary, don't spoil him," Barbara said. "Boys who take out their sisters too often are never considerate to their dates."

I took off while they stood in front of the school talking. After I changed into my slacks, I put on my father's tweed coat that I'd lugged along. It's about ninety years old and it's got leather patches on the elbows and it's way too big for me, but I'm crazy about it. I wear it every chance I get. There was a mirror in the instrument closet, and I looked in it before I left. My hair looked like I'd put it up on curlers, and I tried to run a comb through it but the pain was almost too much to bear. I hated to walk outside with my hair looking like that, so I took the grease out of my instrument case that I oil the valves with, and poured some of it on my hair. God, it was sticky stuff! It made my hair lay down fine, but I still couldn't run a comb through it. I just left it that way, and ran back outside.

Herby and Mary were gone. Barb was waiting for me.

"Let's walk downtown," she said.

We started walking downtown, and when we were nearly down to Main Street, this big black Buick pulled up beside the curb. I could tell it was Bill's car right away, because half of the right fender was gone, and the grill was bashed in.

Pooch stuck his head out the window.

"Well, look at the lovers!"

Then Deacon leaned out of the back window, and he had a bottle of wine in his hand.

I heard Bill say, "Keep the goddam hooch inside."

"Owen Harding," Deacon yelled, "the old reliable ass-bandit!"

"Hey, Owen," Bill yelled, coming closer to the curb, "wanta ride?"

"No thanks, William," I said.

"You might as well," he said, "because you're not going to get anywhere. Rumor has it that Barbara thinks boys are to climb trees with."

"Female passengers have to fend for themselves," Pooch said.

"Hey, O.H., ye old ass-bandit," Deacon yelled, "where's your car? Do you *always* walk girls until they drop dead?"

"It's healthy," I said. "You ought to give it a try sometime."

Bill was cruising along about five miles an hour.

"Who's the ghastly creep you're with, O.H.?"

"Yes," Pooch said. "Who's the rambling wreck from The-Girl's-Detention-Home Tech?"

"Don't mind them," I told Barbara. "They're just jealous, is all."

I could see Deacon pass the bottle up to the front seat. Bill took about half the bottle down in one gulp, and then Pooch finished it off.

Bill began singing:

"Roll me over-r-r in the clover-r-r,
roll me over, lay me down, and do it again!"

Then Deacon and Pooch joined in:

"Oh, this is number one and the fun has just begun,
roll me over, lay me down, and do it again—
Roll me over-r-r in the clover-r-r,
roll me over, lay me down, and do it again!"

"Bill Butler?" Barbara yelled.

"At your service," he yelled, jamming on the brakes.

"Tell me something. Why are you such a simpleton? Is it congenital?"

Pooch and Deacon started laughing, and so did I, and Bill must have really been mad, because he shot away about thirty miles an hour, and that's the last we saw of them.

"Some friends," Barbara said.

"They're not my friends," I said, "except Pooch, and I'm not sure about him any more. I grew up with them."

"Are they always so witty?" she said.

"Oh, they're just having fun with me, Barb. Most guys act like that once in a while."

"Some fun," she said. "I don't think your friends are my cup of tea."

I didn't say anything.

When we got downtown we decided to go to a movie. Since *You Went Away* was playing at the Michigan, and neither of us had seen it so we walked in on the middle of it. It was a sad war picture, with Joseph Cotten and Shirley Temple, who didn't look as pretty as she used to, and we both got kind of bored before it was over. We didn't stay for the newsreels or anything, and the cartoon was lousy because it was all about war, too.

After it was over we went to the Sugar Bowl and had something to eat, and then we walked over to her house. Barbara hadn't said much since the movie.

"Did you like it?" she said.

"Not especially. I could have gone to sleep."

"You know?" she said, "that's exactly the way I felt. I'm not particularly keen on sentimental movies about wounded soldiers." She smiled at me. "I try to put myself in the girls's place. I mean would I want a man once he's been all wounded by the war? Say he came back from the front with no legs, and blinded in both eyes. I don't think I could stand it. Even if I'd been married to him before he went, I think I should have to run away. I guess that makes me a villain according to all the movies, because the nice girl always marries the bashed-up man. It seems as though the more badly wounded he is, the more she loves him."

"I guess you're not one of the nice girls, Barb."

"Oh, come on. You're kidding me and I'm being serious. I think movies like that are slushy and silly."

"People want to see them, though."

"But they aren't true!"

"I'll bet most women are like that woman in the movie. I'll bet the average woman would marry the guy, and then feel like an angel the rest of her life. Just think—if she married a guy like that, she'd never have to do another nice thing."

"That's a queer way of looking at it."

"Well, I think it's true, Barbara. I think the most selfish people are the ones who always seem to be doing something for everybody except themselves. Like Mrs. Kaywoodie—the woman who works for my father. Always doing things for the world. A real queen! She acts like Joan of Arc or somebody. She's the most conceited person I've ever known."

"I'm not that way," Barbara said. "I can hardly cope with my own problems, let alone yours or the world's."

She put her arm through mine as we walked along.

"But you're the sort of person that most people would call self-centered. Always doing things for yourself. But I don't know how you can do favors for other people without doing them for yourself at the same time—the same way electric wires are always getting current at the same time they're sending it. If you please somebody else, you're pleasing yourself at the same time."

"I agree with you."

"So I think everybody's self-centered, Barb. But I don't see why it's bad to be that way. If you're a naturally good person, the self-centered things you do in life will be good. And if you're naturally crabby like Mrs. Kaywoodie—all those things you're always doing for the world will be crabby as hell, and make everybody unhappy."

Barbara smiled at me.

"We seem to agree completely."

"I guess we're awful," I said. "We're self-centered and we admit it."

"We're just hateful," she said, laughing.

I was glad she saw what I meant, and didn't make me explain fifty times like my old man would do. When I try to explain anything to him, he keeps asking me to define my points and pronounce all the words right. By that time I'm so nervous I don't even know what I started out to say.

She saw what I meant, and I was glad.

But there was one thing that made me feel even better. I told her I'd have the car part of the summer, while my old man was in Texas. I was very proud of myself, holding out my best news until the end like that. Especially after seeing Bill cruising around in his Buick. I thought that would be a perfect time to ask her to go steady, but I didn't have the nerve.

"What kind of a car does he have?"

"An Oldsmobile. We've got an old Packard, too, that we haul books around in."

"I don't know one car from another."

"Neither do I."

"It sounds keen, though, your having the car. You can chauffeur me around."

"We'll have a lot of fun with the old heap," I said.

She smiled at me sort of strangely.

"We'll see," she said. "Maybe."

I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I showed her the watch my old man had given me. She thought it was very nice, and she made me promise that she could wear it sometimes.

"I think men's watches are so good-looking."

"This one is, anyway," I said.

"So it's your birthday?"

"Yes."

"Well, happy birthday."

"Thank you, Miss Alslinger."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, I haven't been thinking much about it. And, besides, I haven't known you very long, and I wouldn't want you to think you had to get me something."

She had that strange grin on her face again.

"Are you sure that's the reason you didn't tell me?"

"Sure I am. Why?"

"Are you sure, Owen Harding, it's not because you're a liar? You told me a few weeks ago down by the lake that you were sixteen and a half. Six months have flown by awfully fast, haven't they?"

God, she really had me. It's awful to be caught in your lies!

"Now tell me the truth," she said. "Are you sixteen or seventeen?"

"I'm sixteen going on seventeen," I said. "I'll be seventeen in a little over eleven months."

And then before she had a chance to say anything else, I kissed her. While I was kissing her she put her arms around my back and held me very close. Boy, that surprised me! That didn't seem to be like her at all.

I kissed her again and then she moved away.

"Good night, kid," she said, "and a very happy birthday. I'll see you Sunday."

"Good night, buster," I said. If she wouldn't call me by my own name, I'd call her something even more stupid than kid. "I hope you had a good time."

"I had a wonderful time."

"So did I. Fabulous time!"

"Fantastic time!" she said.

"Stupendous time!" I shouted.

"Super-colossal time!" she yelled.

"Ultra-magnificent time!" I screamed.

"Sh-sh," she said, laughing, "we'll wake up my folks."

She went to the door, and then waved at me.

"Have a nice walk home," she said. "It's a lovely night to walk alone."

"Not lovely," I said. "Ultra-super-stupendous!"

She laughed softly and then, before she went inside, she said something that sounded like "So you're sixteen, you liar." I couldn't be sure, though.

I began walking home. I tried to feel very casual about everything, but to tell you the truth I didn't feel very casual at all. I'd kissed her twice. I'd kissed her twice and she'd let me and she'd kissed me back both times. As I walked along I couldn't feel the sidewalk under my feet, because I guess I must have been floating along about four or five feet up in the air.

17

On June the tenth school was over for the summer, and I managed to pass everything with Mr. Harris's help. I got D's in Biology and Geometry, a C in History, a B in English, and an A in Band. I sure wasn't an honor student by one hell of a long ways, but I felt as good as any A student ever felt.

As soon as the days got warm and long they began flying by like hours and minutes. Pretty soon my old man left for Texas, and he wasn't down there very long before he wrote me a letter saying he was going to stay longer than he thought. He didn't say how much longer.

On the last day of June I asked Barbara to go steady with me, and she really surprised hell out of me by saying she would. It was a strange way to go steady, though, because neither of us had rings, and we didn't believe in that friendship ring kind of stuff, and we weren't together all the time because we both had friends we wanted to be alone with once in a while. All going steady meant was that we liked each other more than anybody else. We got along fine, and we never used the word "love" between us. It kind of embarrassed us.

One thing really began bothering us, though. Neither of us knew much about sex, and so most of the time we were eating or drinking beer, or else reading stories out loud to each other and then laughing or quarreling about them. We played a lot of tennis, too. We did just about everything except fool around with each other. It began driving me wild. I mean I wanted to do things with her, and yet I didn't. I didn't really know what I wanted.

One night we were alone in her house, and dancing to some soft after-midnight music, and I got these very sharp shooting pains all over. I couldn't dance any more. I laid back on the davenport for

a while, and then I felt better. But I began getting these pains more and more often, and finally I knew there must be something awful wrong with me.

I was very scared. I didn't tell Barbara there was something wrong with me, but I called up Pooch and told him I had to see him right away. If I didn't have such a morbid fear of doctors I would have gone to one, but I hoped that Pooch might know something after prowling through my father's medical books. He sure as hell *should* know something. He should be the sexiest guy going, after reading so many sex books.

I met Pooch one night at Mike's after taking Barb home from playing tennis. I wanted to buy him a couple of hamburgs and then take him to a movie, but he wouldn't let me. He seemed sort of P Od. I was nervous. We hadn't been alone together since before my mother died, and the last time I'd seen him to talk to was that night we played ping-pong and I acted like a moron.

After we started eating I told him what a stupid idiot I was about the paddle, and pretty soon we were laughing about it, and then we were best friends like we'd always been. It was like nothing had ever happened. Like we'd been seeing each other every day.

I ordered a glass of iced coffee. "Listen, Pooch—I'm worried about something."

"What's the matter? Is Barbara Alslinger giving you a rough time?"

"No, it's my health I'm worried about. There's something wrong with me."

"How d'you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's a —— Listen, Pooch, what does it mean when you have pains in your stomach?"

He lit a cigarette and blew smoke rings at me.

"I don't know, it could be anything. Maybe you eat in this dump too much."

"No—it's nothing like that. I get these stabbing pains——" I looked around to see if anyone was watching us. "Right down here," I said, pointing.

"Are you kidding?" he said. "I'll bet you're just trying to impress me."

"Impress you, for crissake! What's so impressive about having pains between your legs?"

The waiter brought our checks and we didn't say anything until he left.

"Could you've strained yourself lifting something heavy—maybe cleaning up around the house?"

"I don't lift a finger around the house, Pooch. Dad got a woman to do that before he went to Texas."

"The skin changed color?"

"Come on, Pooch—it's nothing like that. It's not down there. I'm telling you it's right in the bottom of my stomach, and between my legs sort of."

"Let me ask the questions. I might be able to get at something if you don't keep butting in." He leaned across the table. "Now, let me see, can you take a leak okay? Does it come out easy?"

"I'd do better with an eye dropper," I said.

He looked very scared.

"What've you been doing with her, anyway?"

"I'm just kidding you, Pooch. There's nothing like that wrong with me."

"Well, you never can tell," he said.

"I'm telling you there's nothing like that the matter with me." I moved to the edge of the booth so he could see me better. "Look, Pooch, it's right down here. Right where you get hernias and stuff. And I can feel this pain on both sides. It throbs sometimes, and then sometimes I can't feel it for three or four days."

"Oh, that's different," he said, trying to look like he knew what he was talking about. He would make a very successful doctor if he could perfect that look. "I thought you were talking about something else."

"And, listen Pooch—I've had these pains on and off for a couple of months now."

"God, it sounds serious!"

"It is. What d'you suppose it is?"

"Well," Pooch said, "you've probably got a hernia."

"On both sides?"

"Sure. A double hernia."

"Can you get something like that if you're not an athletic bastard?"

"Sure."

"I don't know how. I never do anything that would strain an average three-year-old girl."

"You lug that big horn around," he said. "If I were you I'd see a doctor."

"Well, you're not me."

I lit one of Pooch's cigarettes.

"It sounds to me like you've got a double hernia," he said.

"I still don't think it could be that. I remember Doc Goody told me I had strong rings or something. What else could it be?"

He sat there knocking ashes into his water glass, and watched them float to the bottom. The more I talked about the pains, the more I could feel them.

"Had your appendix out, Owen?"

"Come on, don't be silly. They're up here."

"That's right. They are, aren't they?"

"Boy, you're going to make one hell of a doctor!"

"But you *could* get pains down there if your appendix were really rotten. If they were ready to burst and all."

"I had them out when I was six."

"When do you notice the pain most?" Pooch asked me after a minute.

"Say—it's funny you should ask me that. It seems to be very bad at night, usually Fridays and Saturdays."

"That's goddam strange. Do you especially strain yourself on those nights?"

"Not that I know of."

"You don't do anything at all? You haven't taken up dynamic tension or anything, have you?"

"Likely chance," I said. "I've been spending my time with Barbara, not Charles Atlas."

"Barbara!" Pooch pounded the table with his fists, and the glasses danced across the table. "Of course, Owen, that's it!"

I looked at him stupidly.

"Your groins—I read it in a book once. I think your father has a sex book on it down at the store. . . ."

"What the hell are you talking about? I haven't done anything to her."

"That's the whole trouble, don't you see? You've built up all this tension, and nothing's happened. So you start aching, and you'll prob'ly ache like hell until something happens."

"Do you think that's it?"

"I know it is." He looked at me for a long time. "And there's only one cure. Either you'll have to go all the way with her, or else not see her any more."

"Go all the way?"

"Sure. Why not? I think she needs a good hosing. That's all girls are good for anyway."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I just can't, that's all."

"Well," he said, "that's the only way the pains'll go away. I'll stake my whole goddam medical career on it."

"Don't be so generous," I said.

"What're you afraid of, Owen?"

"Nothing," I said. "I'm not afraid of anything." I got up from the table. "Come on—let's got to a movie. I'll pay your fee by taking you to a movie. You be my date, Poochikins. I guess you're safer than she is."

"Now you're talking," he said. "Let's go."

As we walked along the street I thought about what he'd told me. It sounded crazy, but probably true.

"Did you really read that stuff in a book?" I said. "Or are you kidding me?"

"I really read it," he said.

"Goddam," I said.

And then we went to this movie that I can hardly remember at

all. It seemed to have something to do with Barbara, and a poor bastard who kept getting pains all the time. I was glad when the stupid thing ended.

On Friday night I drove Barbara out to the Grand River. We parked the car about a mile downstream from the canoe cabin, and walked along by the water feeding the ducks. The sun was just going down behind the birch trees on the other side of the river. The river was dark and smooth and fast, and you could hear the water splashing over the rocks where the river was shallow. It was quiet out there.

Barbara had a sack of bread crumbs and the ducks waddled right up next to her, quacking, and almost took them out of her hands.

"Should I rent a canoe?"

"No, this is more fun," Barbara said. "Hey—look at that duck!" She pointed at a mallard. "Isn't he a beauty? The females are so dingy and colorless compared to him."

"Ducks are like people in that way," I said.

She knelt down and spread some crumbs on the ground. The mallard looked at her, wiggled his head and waddled away.

"Make up a four-line poem about him," I said. "Go on. See if you can."

She didn't smile. She was in one of her moods, and when she got like that she liked to walk along by the water and not say much. She wasn't the easiest girl going to understand, and I wondered what the hell Bill used to talk with her about. They must have had a hilarious time together.

We walked farther on down the river, away from the canoe cabin.

"I've got a brand-new riddle for you, buster." She loved to try and solve riddles.

"Well, riddle me."

"What's the difference between a cat and a comma?"

She put her little fingers between her teeth and frowned at me.

"That's a tricky one," she said. We sat down on a tree stump about three feet from the edge of the river. "Why, golly, I can

think of millions of differences. You should ask me what they have in common. That would be harder."

"It wouldn't be a riddle, though."

"Well, let me see—the difference between a cat and a comma." She rocked back and forth on the tree stump with her hands around her knees. "I give up, kid. That's too tricky for me."

"You give up already?"

"Absolutely give up. What's the difference?"

"Well, it's simple. A comma's a pause at the end of a clause, and a cat's got claws at the end of its paws."

"Oh, my," she said, laughing, "that's a poem and a riddle at the same time."

"Pretty good, isn't it?"

"Not bad," she said. "Not bad at all."

Right then a canoe passed us on the river; a light flared as the guy paddling lit a cigarette, and we could see the outline of a girl next to him lighting a cigarette from the same match, and then the match went out and the river was dark again, darker than ever, and after a minute we could hear the girl and the boy laughing, and the girl kept saying, "Don't, John, oh don't!" but you could tell that she really wanted him to do whatever he was doing. It was the way she said "Don't John," laughing all the time. We were sitting a few inches apart on the tree stump, looking out at the dark forms of the birch trees on the other side of the river, and pretty soon we couldn't hear the sound of paddling any more. I looked at Barbara; her hair was blowing a little in the wind. Her head was back. Then a car pulled up about thirty feet away from us, and I could see her face very clearly in the light. Her face was white and her hair was very black down the long line of her neck. Then the headlights went out and I couldn't see her very well any more. I leaned over and kissed her. She let me kiss her for a second, without kissing back, and then she got up and walked a few feet closer to the river. Her head was bent, and I felt lousy all of a sudden.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Did I do something wrong?"

After a minute she said, "I don't know."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

I got up and walked over to her.

"There must be something wrong. . . ."

"I'm all right, Owen." She heaved a stone into the river, and we could hear the splash but we couldn't see anything. The light of the sun was gone from the sky and the sky was black. "I don't know what's wrong. We're kissing a lot, and I guess I'm not too keen on it somehow."

"Don't you like me?"

"Like you? Sometimes I feel like melting when you touch me. I must like you very much."

"Then what's wrong, Barbara?"

"Oh, I don't know." She sounded sort of angry.

"Isn't it fun to kiss?" I asked her.

"No. I don't know. I'm not sure it is."

And then she laughed in a way that kind of scared me, and before I had a chance to say anything she kissed me very hard. "Let's not talk any more about anything. Let's just enjoy ourselves."

"But I want to know what's wrong."

She started walking back to the car.

"Maybe I'm just peculiar and want something right out of a poem. Like a knight or a prince on a white charger." She laughed again. "A lovely young prince who'll wake me out of my dreams and carry me off into a beautiful life. I feel asleep so much of the time, and not part of anything at all."

"Maybe you write too much poetry," I said. I was getting very P Od. I unlocked the door of the car and she got in.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," I said, "I'm no goddam Sir Galahad on a charger or anything."

I started the car and she came up close to me.

"I'm not so sure that you aren't."

"Well, I'm not. Just take my word for it."

I slammed the car in reverse, did a very fast U turn, and drove

over the wooden bridge so fast we're lucky we didn't sail off into the river. I couldn't understand what she was trying to say, and I didn't want to talk about it any more. I had the car in front of her house in about two minutes.

She didn't get out. When I started to get out she put her hand on my shoulder.

"Owen——?"

I told her she was home and it was pretty late.

"Don't be a simpleton. Please don't be simple."

Before I had a chance to ask her what she meant, she kissed me long and hard on the mouth, in a way she'd never kissed me before. After we'd kissed for a long time I started to move away, but she wouldn't let me. She kept kissing me. Finally I french kissed her. I'd never done that before and she didn't seem to mind at all. When I had a chance I turned on the radio to some music. The music was soft and we kissed for a long time. When I looked at my watch it was nearly twelve, and then I saw that she was crying. For a second when I first looked at her, I almost started crying too.

"You did it for me, didn't you?" I said. "You didn't really want to do this."

"Oh, yes I did, I wanted to," she said. But I could tell she didn't.

"You didn't have to," I said. "I didn't want to very much. We don't have to love it up all the time."

"But you want to."

"I wasn't enjoying myself."

"Weren't you really?"

"Oh, I don't know! Please quit asking me."

"I guess it's a bad night for me, Owen. Maybe someday you'll understand."

"It's a bad night for both of us," I said, squeezing her hand. "Every time you let me kiss you like that I knew you didn't want to."

"I *did* want to in a way, though."

"I don't believe you," I said.

"Oh, I must be terrifically old-fashioned. I guess I don't think it's love, and I guess that's what I need to make it any good."

She started crying again. I couldn't say anything. I felt if I said anything it would sound completely stupid and corny. I lit a cigarette and puffed like hell on it.

"Owen—what are you thinking?" she said after a couple of minutes.

"Nothing."

"What are you thinking about?"

"About purple string and waffles, for crissake! And onions and mud pies. I always think about them."

"Try not to be angry."

"I'm not. I'm not mad—I feel crummy." I put out the cigarette and lit another one. "I'm thinking about my mother."

"You loved her a lot, didn't you?"

"I'm thinking about what she's thinking of me right this minute."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, she's watching me from wherever she is. Doesn't that sound strange? I sound like a minister or something. But I do feel she's watching me, and she knows me better now than she ever did. It scares me, too."

"I know just how you feel. I really do. Isn't it amazing? I felt just the same way when my mother died."

"And it scares the hell out of me sometimes—I feel she can read my mind, and knows every dirty and lousy thought I have. She's watching me all the time, and she must have a hard time recognizing me. She was quite prudish. She probably wishes now she hadn't had me for a son." I held Barbara's hand and looked at her. "And right now, while I'm talking about her, she's listening."

"You'll get over that feeling after a while—when you really accept the death."

"I hope so."

"I know you will."

"Maybe I will. I hope I do."

We sat there for a few more minutes, and then I walked her to the door. We stood on the porch holding hands. Her parents had left the porch light on for her. She told me she was very keen on

me, and I said I liked her a lot, too. Then we kissed good night very quickly. I don't think she felt like kissing right then any more than I did, but we felt we had to somehow. I ran down the stairs and jumped in the car. I'd left the motor running.

On the way home I noticed for the first time that night that the moon was new and that's why it was so dark out and you couldn't see anything. It's funny how long you can go sometimes without noticing things.

18

As soon as I got home I went right to bed. I was asleep when the phone rang. The only people I could think of who'd call at such an ungodly hour were Paul from the South Pacific someplace or my father from Texas. God, I was nervous! I looked at my watch and it was two o'clock in the goddam morning.

"Hello?" I said, yawning all over the receiver.

"Lo you ole basshard. Whoshe tricks—O.H. ole boy?"

"Who's this?" I said. It sounded like a million different guys I'd heard drunk at one time or another. Whoever it was sounded so drunk I began feeling a little drunk myself.

"Been getting any ink on your dink, ole buddy? Don't keep any shecrets from me. You tell papa all about your inky dink, and who you've been signing your shignithure on. You been inking up ole Barbara—Barbara whadjamacallit? Come on, tell papa all."

It was Bill Butler, and I could hear about six thousand people laughing in the background.

"What are you doing calling me up at this time of the morning, Bill? Unless you're giving away any money, which is impossible, call me back in the goddam morning."

He dropped the receiver on something hard, like a table, and almost deafened me. "Listen, Bill, you——"

"Hold on, take it easy—shombody wants to talk to ya. Now don't drop your drawers on the Capitol lawn, and keep your ink dinky, ole buddy ole socko-kiddo, ole chap."

Then Deacon said, "Doctor? How goes it?" He didn't sound drunk at all. "Listen——"

"Listen hell. You listen—I'm asleep. What're you doing

calling me up now anyway. I have to work tomorrow."

"Ah—the big business tycoon. Tell me your secret, O.H., do you go to bed with your boots on?"

"About as often as you go to bed with your mouth shut," I said. The witty bastard. "I'm hanging up on you in about two seconds."

"Well, if you won't listen to me maybe you'll listen to Pooch. We're trying to do you a favor," Deacon said. "One big juicy favor, too."

"I'll bet you are."

"We are—honest. Hold on, here's Pooch. He'll tell you all about it."

I could hear them arguing and shouting, and then Deacon said, "Your buddy doesn't seem to be in favor of our master plan, so I'll have to tell you. It's Bill's plan, but Bill's a little under the weather right now, so I'll have to explain it to you. Ready?"

"Make it snappy," I said. I was getting a little interested, though.

"Bill's folks are going to the country next week end, and he's invited a guest over to the house. Female guest." I could hear Bill's loud voice yelling, "Gang Bang, boys—we'll have a smashing Gang Bang!" and he was laughing like a maniac. "So anyhow," said Deacon in a whisper, "you're invited."

"Invited to what?" I said, "a Gang Bang?"

"Brilliant deduction, O.H."

"Who's the girl?"

"You'll never guess in a million years."

"Well tell me then, will you, Deacon? No kidding, it's late and I've got to get some sleep."

"Just make one guess," he said.

"All right," I said, and thought about it for a minute. "Is it Miss Reynolds?"

"Not bad, Doctor, not bad. It's just about that appetizing." He told Bill and Pooch I'd said Miss Reynolds, and they laughed. And then he said in an even lower whisper, "Paula Gionfriddo."

"Who?"

"Paula Gionfriddo. You know—Paula! Bill's going to pick her

up in the car Saturday night when she's through jerking sodas. We'll be waiting here when they get back, see? We'll have some whisky and beer and stuff, and it'll be a regular party."

"You're crazy. She wouldn't do anything like that."

"Of course she would. Why not? They don't call her the town punch board for nothing."

"Oh, they call a lot of girls Prone Joans. Don't be so dumb. Especially girls that quit school. I——"

"Shall we count you out?" he said.

"I just don't believe it, is all."

"Well," Deacon said, "come on along and join the fun. Find out."

"He didn't come right out and ask her, did he?" I was beginning to feel funny.

"He as much as did."

"How? Did he open his fly in the middle of the drugstore at high noon? You know he lies like a rug, Deacon. What did he say to her, anyway?"

"He told her there was some money in it for her. That's no lie either. I was right there with him when he said it, and she said she'd come. And that look on her face wasn't pure innocence, either."

"Maybe I'm wrong about her," I said. Suddenly I didn't know who I hated most—Bill or Paula.

"You sure are, Doctor. Your head's in the clouds."

"I'll come," I told him.

He told Pooch and Bill I'd come and I heard Bill shouting his head off, and then Deacon said, "Bring along some money."

"Don't worry," I said.

"Listen," Deacon said, in a whisper again, "it's the first time for all of us, so keep it quiet. Slim says it's best to keep it quiet."

"You mean you told Slim so you could find out whether you should keep it quiet or not? Deacon, you're going to make a brilliant lawyer."

"Slim won't tell anyone."

"Well, I hope not."

"You're in on it then."

"I said I was."

"Great! I'll pick you up Saturday night."

"No—I'll pick you up. Then you can pay for part of the gas."

"We'll both drive," he said. "You can bring Pooch."

"Okay," I said, "I'll see you then," and I hung up in the middle of something he was saying.

The upstairs phone was in my old man's bedroom, and I sat on his bed for a long time. I didn't feel sleepy any more. I wanted to call somebody but I didn't know who, and, besides, it was two-thirty in the morning. Two-thirty in the morning and I was alone, and I didn't feel sleepy enough to go back to bed any more. I just sat by the phone, looking at it, and yet not looking at it. For nearly an hour I sat there like that, just staring at the goddam phone. And then I did something I'd never done before, and I hope I never do again. I started crying over nothing at all. I sat on my father's bed crying, and there was nothing to cry about that I could see and I didn't even feel very sad or anything. It was like falling through space all by yourself and feeling bigger than the whole world and smaller than the smallest stone, and knowing that no matter what happened to you in the end, it would happen to you all by yourself. When I was through crying, I felt quieter inside than I could ever remember. My eyelids would hardly stay up and I almost didn't even make it to bed.

The next morning I slept through the alarm, and I didn't wake up until Mrs. Kaywoodie called me at a little after eleven o'clock in the morning to find out if I was dead or something.

"Really, Owen!" she said, "you shouldn't be so terribly irresponsible, and with your father gone, and me here alone with Mr. Cannon on vacation, and what exactly d'you expect me to do if you're going to be so terribly irresponsible? Really, Owen!"

As I listened to her I decided that the sound of the alarm wasn't such a bad sound. You could always throw the clock against the wall, which was something you couldn't do to her.

I finally got down to the store about one o'clock, and spent the rest of the afternoon listening to Mrs. Kaywoodie run off at the

mouth. She didn't bother me much, though. Maybe because I didn't care any more for her than she cared for me, which was nothing at all. When people don't care for each other it seems like they can say most anything and not hurt each other.

On Monday Mr. Cannon was back, swearing about what a crummy vacation he'd had, and I only had to work in the mornings. I spent most of the week thinking about Saturday night, and wondering if the weird deal with Paula would really come off. On Thursday and Friday afternoons I played tennis with Barbara, and when I walked her home afterwards I didn't even hold her hand or anything. She didn't seem to mind. On Friday night we went to a dance at the Country Club, and when I drove her home afterwards we sat in front of her shack listening to the car radio, and I didn't even try and kiss her. She didn't seem to mind that either, and we sat out in front of her house telling funny stories about people we knew and we laughed a lot. When I drove home from her house it came to me why I hadn't kissed her, not even good night or anything. Maybe the trouble we'd had the week before had something to do with it, but it was mostly because of going in on this rotten deal with Paula. If I could do something like that, what right did I have to screw around with Barbara? Anyway, the last two times I'd seen her I hadn't had those stupid pains in my groins. That was something.

Deacon was already sort of drunk when me and Pooch got to Bill's house. It was a very hot night out and I was sweating like crazy. Pooch mixed himself a whisky and soda and took it down in one gulp. I could see he was going to get drunk as fast as he could.

"Well, you boys feeling horny?" Deacon said.

"I want to get drunk," Pooch said, making another drink. "Royally blewed, screwed, stewed and tattooed."

"Not tonight, Doctor, you're crazy. You ought to stay sober. It's more fun that way."

"I suppose you're speaking from experience," I said. I un-

loosened the knot in my tie. "I happen to know that it's better and safer to be drunk."

They both looked at me like I knew something, so I decided I'd better make up something.

"You see," I told them very slowly and significantly, "alcohol kills germs. She's bound to be covered with germs if she goes in for this kind of thing a lot——"

"That's a crock," Pooch interrupted. "I happened to read in one of your father's——"

"Just listen a minute and I'll tell you what I read in a story once. Overseas ninety-seven per cent of the women have diseases, and so they shoot injections into all the soldiers before they get leaves or anything. Wood alcohol's what they shoot into them. You see, when these women fool around too much they grow this green fungus——"

"I'm not in the mood for bedtime stories," Deacon said.

"Now listen to me, goddamit, Deacon, and quit trying to be so witty. Anyway, some of these women grow green fungus. The work horses. So what this story said you should do is carry a flashlight and iodine with you. The Army gives you a khaki kit with a flashlight and iodine in it." I drank down the drink Pooch made for me very slowly, and tried to think of what to say next. Deacon tried to act like he wasn't interested, but he was. "So then you get a room with one of the girls. And if you're smart you say to yourself—is she a green fungus girl, or isn't she? That's what you ask yourself," I said, "if you're smart. You tell her to sit down on the bed and take off her clothes. Then you open your khaki kit and haul out the old flashlight and shine it on her. You get down there and shine it all around. D'you know what you do then?" I asked them. They didn't seem to know. "Well, if she's okay, which is never, you jump in bed with her, but if she's sort of mildly green and just a little eaten up with fungus, you pour the bottle of iodine all over her, and jump in bed with her after it dries. But if she's a real green fungus girl, which almost always happens, you pack up your kit and run like hell." I looked at them. "That's the Army way," I said.

"And you lie through your teeth," Pooch said.

"He thinks from his shoulder blades," Deacon said. "He doesn't tire his brain that way, and he can babble on all night."

"Ah well," I said, "some people would rather be cynical than healthy."

"What happened next?" Deacon asked me. "We don't want to be rude."

"Well, the guy in the story was in this kind of situation. D'you know what he did?"

"I know," Deacon said, raising his hand. "Let me answer. He forgot his kit one day, and about a week later his head turned green and fell off."

Pooch thought that was very funny, but not half as funny as Deacon thought it was.

"All right—let me tell you the rest of the story, you unbelieving bastards. This guy was very clever about this one girl who fell in love with him. He knew she was in love with him because she wanted to kiss him. Kissing means love to girls like that—the other stuff is just professional. Well, anyway, this girl wanted to kiss him, so he hauled out the old flashlight and shined it in her mouth. Her mouth looked like a fairly good risk, but he was too cunning and clever to take any chances. He uncorked the iodine and made her swallow it all, and then they had a very hot necking session."

"Where did they bury her?" Pooch said.

"Does the author of that story enjoy prison life?" Deacon asked.

"You both have the imagination of a ripe turd," I said. "I think it's a pretty good story."

"Remember," Deacon said to Pooch, "when we used to believe this jerk? I remember when I was eight or nine he had me convinced that Fleming was about to be overrun by dinosaurs. Boy, you used to tell them, O.H.!"

"And you really ate them up, too."

"Let's all have another drink," Pooch said. He made me a very strong one.

"Bill ought to be back," Deacon said. He got up from his chair

and started upstairs. "I think I'll go to the john—nature's calling me."

"Hey, Owen, listen to him. He calls it a john now, like one of the girls."

"Oh, I'm just one of the girls." Deacon said, flouncing up the stairs. "I thirtinly am. Are you coming, Pooch, tweetheart? We'll play a tweet game—I'll be Betty Grable and you be you."

"I guess I'll comb my hair," Pooch said, and he went upstairs, too.

I picked up a copy of *House Beautiful* and leafed through it. It was full of models and cooking receipes and advice to women, and seeing that none of those things knocked me out, I tried to read something about a new, secret war weapon the United States was working on, but I couldn't concentrate any more on the stupid *Life* than on *House Beautiful*. I kept wondering about Paula, and whether or not this thing was really coming off. I had the jitters, and I made another drink. The first drink had gone to my head a little; I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast.

Bill's house was really nice inside; maybe everything looked a little too new and shiny, but the place was very well-decorated. Up until last year Bill's mother used to have a column in the Sunday Fleming *World* about home decoration and all that stuff. She probably got most of this very modern furniture for nothing, because in her columns she was always mentioning Friedman's furniture or Wilson's furniture or somebody else's furniture, and to buy their kind and nobody else's. Very shrewd woman, but a real prude. The thing that really got me was, she could write a column that made sense and Bill had trouble just signing his name to something. He must have been a throwback to one of his screwy greataunts or somebody.

When Deacon and Pooch came back downstairs, Bill drove into the driveway. We heard the car door slam, then a high laugh, then footsteps on the porch.

"Well," Bill shouted, "here're the bandits to greet us. You know 'em all, don't you, Paula?"

"Sure I do, for sure. How's it going, boys?"

"Fine," Pooch said, looking down at his feet. "How you doing?"

"How's the girl?" Deacon said, laughing, and he shook hands with her. "Make a lot of sundaes today?"

"Hello, Paula. How are you?"

"Gimme the wrap, beautiful," Bill said, and he pinched her on the butt. She haw-hawed a little and then told him to stop it. He was really the gentleman.

We walked into the dining room, and Deacon made her a drink. He filled up the glass with whisky and ice, and put in about three drops of soda—I saw him.

"Say, Billy," she said, "where's the little girl's room?"

"The head of the stairs and the second door to the left," he said. And then he grinned. "Ya need any help, beautiful?"

"Not from you," she said, haw-hawing again. "For sure!"

She walked away, waving her hips like they had a life of their own. She was wearing a dark purple silk dress, and she had on a green hat with two white feathers sticking out of both ends of it like horns. God, it was something to see! It was awful!

"Nice work, Bill," Deacon said. "Very smooth. "Did you have any trouble with her?"

Bill snapped his fingers. "A cinch," he said.

Pooch was on about his fifth drink.

"What makes you so damn sure of that?" I asked Bill.

"Christ, Harding, just open your eyes. We've got it made in the shade with this one. Any broad that flunks out of school and dresses like she does and jerks sodas must jerk other things too."

"Well put," I said.

"Bill's right," Deacon said. "She's a Prone Joan if I ever saw one."

Pooch finished his drink and slammed the glass down on the table. We all looked at him.

"What's wrong, Miller?" Bill said.

"I don't feel good."

"Well, lay off the goddam hooch."

"I feel like drinking."

"You wanta back out or something?"

"I didn't say that, for crissake!"

"Don't drink so much," Deacon said.

"I'll drink all I goddam please."

"Well," Bill said, "you're not gonna be in very good condition——"

"Leave him alone," I told Bill.

"Listen, Bill, what makes you think you want her any more than I do? I'm looking forward to it."

"You'll be blind," Deacon said, "if you don't take it easy on that stuff."

"I'm not drunk," Pooch said. "Sometimes you can't get drunk if you want to."

"Well, you seem drunk to me," Deacon said.

"Listen," Bill said, "here's the way we'll work it." He leaned back on his heels and stuck his thumbs in the pockets of his checked vest, and grinned at all of us. "We shoot the breeze for a while and dance or listen to music or something. Then one of us slips upstairs to my room, see? And the rest of us pretend we don't notice." He snapped his fingers. "It's as easy as A B C."

"What comes after C, Bill?"

"What's your problem, Harding?"

"Oh, nothing, old man. I was just thinking out loud."

"Who's first?" Deacon asked.

"Yeah, well here's the way I was thinking of working that. I don't wanta be greedy and grab firsts, so we'll draw straws," Bill said. "Longest first and so on."

"Kind of like symbols, you mean?"

Bill looked at me blankly and said "Yeah."

Right then I wanted to knock him down more than I ever wanted to before.

"You'd better make it snappy," Pooch said. "She'll be down in a second. She might not appreciate all this."

Bill ran into the kitchen and came back with two straws. He broke them into four pieces. He put them in a sack and shook them around, grinning at us all the time. Pooch's straw looked like the longest, but mine was bent a little and when we measured them

mine was just a shade longer. Bill's was third longest and Deacon's was the shortest.

Bill asked me if I wanted to trade. I had a pretty good idea he'd ask me that.

I said hell no.

Then Paula came clomping downstairs with a wild clatter of heels, holding her dress a little above her knees, and Bill ran into the kitchen with the straws.

When he was really going to get something out of it, Bill was a very good host. He made us drinks, except for Pooch who was too fast for him, and he kept putting dance music on the phonograph, and made the conversation go by telling corny jokes when nobody else knew what to say. Deacon and Bill did most of the dancing with Paula. She seemed to have the energy of a goddam bull moose—jerking sodas all day and dancing and yucking it up all night. I danced with her once, and Pooch didn't dance at all. And finally he got sick, and I helped him upstairs.

After he was through being sick, he sat on the edge of the tub with his head in his hands.

"You'd better go home, Pooch."

"I'm sticking it out."

"Oh, that's silly. Nobody'll call you a coward if you leave. This isn't a goddam cross-country playoff."

"I want her just as much as Bill does," he said sort of angrily.

"Well, you'd better quit drinking then."

"For crissake—leave me alone!" he shouted at me.

"Okay," I said. "I'll see you later downstairs."

As soon as I got back down, Bill got me over in the corner and said it was time, and he even told me what to say. That was one thing about Bill; he was shrewder than hell when it came to things like that.

"How about this dance, Paula?"

"I'd love to," she said, "for sure." She smiled and her big, crooked teeth stared out at me. "I just adore Les Brown more'n anything, don't you?"

"He's darn good," I said.

We danced around the living room for a while. Bill and Deacon had gone into the kitchen.

"Say, Paula," I said, holding her close so that I didn't have to look at her, "Paula—you know Bill and I used to build model airplanes. Some very beautiful jobs."

"That's what Billy said," she said. "I'd love to see them, for sure."

"Would you really?" I said, wishing like hell she'd said no. I danced her toward the stairs, though.

"You lead the way," she said.

We walked up the stairs, and as we passed the bathroom we could see Pooch still sitting on the edge of the bathtub.

"What's the matter with your friend?" she said.

"He's had too much to drink."

"That's a shame, for sure," she told me.

I opened the door to Bill's room. She sat right down on the bed and kicked off her shoes. The first thing I did was walk over to Bill's dresser and grab these two model airplanes that were laying on top, and take them over to Paula. She held them at a few different angles, and squinted at them, but she didn't seem very interested. I'm glad she didn't ask me any questions, because I don't know anything at all about model airplanes. I didn't know what to say. I lit a cigarette and walked over to the window and looked outside.

"Why don'tcha offer me one?" she said.

I almost ran over to her with a cigarette. She lit it herself, though. I handed her the matches. My hand was jumping around too much to try and light it myself.

"Thanks," she said, blowing out a big cloud of smoke. She leaned back on the bed with her head against the wall. Her dress was up a little above her knees, and I tried to look like I didn't know it. "You're really a nervous character, aren'tcha?" she said.

"Not at all," I said. "Not at all." I managed to take a drag on my cigarette without missing my mouth.

"Well," she said, "you act like it, for sure."

"That's because I was out late last night," I said. I walked over

to the door. "Listen, Paula, why don't I go down and get our drinks? I feel like a drink, don't you?"

"Okey doke," she said, pulling down her dress a little, "but make me a fresh one. With a little less dynamite. Your buddy Deacon forgot the soda last time."

I told her I'd be right back and I ran downstairs, into the dining room.

"You through already?" Bill asked me.

"Boy," Deacon said, "old O.H. must be more potent than he looks."

"She wants a drink," I said.

As I was pouring the liquor, Bill put his arm around me. "How's it going?" he said. I put a lot of soda into hers, and spilled just a little in mine.

"Great," I said as I walked to the stairs. Pooch came down the stairs and staggered by me, looking white as all hell. "Really great. Just like you said, Bill, she's a cinch."

When she tried her drink she said, "This is better," and smacked her lips. I sat down on the bed beside her.

We talked a little but most of the time we just sat there drinking. She was in junior high school with my brother for a couple of years, so I told her he was in the service, and we talked about the service for a while. She finished her drink and I poured part of mine into her glass. She smiled at me. Then she ran her hand back and forth across my neck.

"You have nice smooth skin," she said.

I squeezed her hands. "So have you," I said, but she wasn't listening any more.

I put my glass on the floor and moved farther back on the bed, closer to her.

"Got another cigarette?" she said.

I lit it for her and watched her blow out the smoke. She wasn't exactly pretty to look at.

She turned over on her side, propping herself on her elbow. She took one of my hands in hers. "You go steady with somebody, Owen?"

"No," I said. "Not now I don't."

"You're not going steady with anybody at all?"

"No."

She grinned at me. "You're a big liar," she said, "for sure!"

Boy, I was feeling nervous! "Well, I do take out Barbara Alslinger sometimes. D'you know her?"

She nodded her head up and down, and squeezed my hand. "Sure I know her," she said, finishing the rest of her drink. She took my hand and kissed the palm of my hand with her tongue. "The silly little bitch!"

I stared at her. I just stared at her, and didn't know what to say.

"Well," she said, "what're we doing here anyway? Having a health cure? I'm getting bored, for sure."

I kissed her then, and she put her arm around me and held me very hard. The water in the bottom of her glass spilled down the side of my shirt as she started to put her other arm around me. She had garlic on her breath.

I was very clumsy trying to unbutton her dress, and she said, "You're not very experienced, are you?"

"Not very," I said. "I guess you are, though."

"Whataya mean by that?" she asked me, sitting up a little.

"Nothing. Nothing—I just didn't know whether you were or not. I was just asking."

"I've been around," she said, breathing garlic all over the place. She pushed my hand away. "Here, let me help you, clumsy."

I was kissing her again when there was a soft knock on the door. There was another knock, louder, and Bill said, "Hey, Owen, can you come out a second? I'm sorry as hell to bother you but something's happened."

"For crissake!" Paula said.

She was lying back on the bed looking up at the ceiling. Her face was wider and uglier than ever, as she lay back like that. Right then I wanted to run away from her and never see her again, and I felt somehow that I could learn to hate her with no trouble at all.

"Just a second," I said to Paula.

She didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll be back in a second," and I went outside. Bill looked more worried than I'd ever seen him.

"Listen, we gotta get her the hell out of here in a hurry. My mother just called, and she's driving in to pick up some clothes for my old man. He's staying in the country to fish all week." He was chewing his nails. "Come on, bounce her out of there."

"You bounce her out, Butler, she's your date."

He was so nervous he didn't even hear what I said. After a minute he busted into the room and told Paula his mother was very sick and he had to go out to the country and pick her up. As I walked downstairs I heard her voice and it didn't sound too happy and joyous.

I went into the dining room and poured myself a straight shot of whisky.

"Did you get it?" Deacon said.

"Twenty-one times, Deacon, or twenty-two. I lost track." I drank down the whisky, and breathed flames.

"Did you really make it with her, or didn't you?" Pooch asked me. "Tell the truth."

"There wasn't time," I said. "But she was very willing."

Bill came down the stairs with Paula then, and she looked P Od as hell. He looked like he was about ready to bawl.

"Listen," Bill said, jerking his thumb at Paula, "one of you guys drive her home, will ya? I've gotta take care of my mother and everything." He looked at Deacon. "How about it, Deac boy? I'm sorry as all hell to ask you, but that's the way the ball bounces."

Deacon stood there pouting. "Oh—okay," he said, "I guess I have to."

"Say, don't do me any favors there, shorty," said Paula.

That really made Deacon mad. He can't stand being called "shorty;" it drives him crazy.

He took a step forward and shook his fist at her. "You go to hell, you slut!"

"What the hell did you say?"

"I said you can go to hell."

"What the hell did you call me?"

Deacon's face was beginning to twitch and he backed away from her.

"Nothing."

"The hell you didn't, shorty. I heard what you said—for goddam sure!" Paula walked up to him and slapped him hard, twice, across the face. And then without saying a word, she walked out of the house, slamming the door behind her so hard she almost broke the windows in the living room.

Deacon sat down on the davenport, rubbing his hand back and forth across his face.

"Why did you have to go and do that?" Bill asked him. "That was sure smart as hell. She could get us in trouble, you know."

"Leave him alone—he couldn't help getting mad," Pooch said. He stood in the middle of the room, swaying a little like a tall tree in a storm. His eyes were glassy and blank and not pointed directly at anything, like a sick person's eyes. "Come on, Owen—let's go home."

"That bitch of a slut!" Deacon said.

"Why don't you take it easy," Pooch said. "Forget it. She's only a lay anyway."

"You oughta go give her a goddam ride," Bill said. "You really oughta, Deac. We shouldn't get her sore."

"She can find her way home," he said.

"That's one hell of an attitude," Bill said. "You should——"

"Why don't you take her, Bill?" I said. "You happened to bring her."

"You can drop dead at the count of three, Harding."

Pooch swayed over to Bill and said, "Owen's right you bastard. Why pawn the dirty work off on Deacon?"

We were all nervous, and it looked like there might be a fight or something stupid like that when the doorbell rang.

Bill went to the door and opened it.

"I forgot my key, Pumpkin. Give mumsie a kiss."

"Boy, you sure got here fast, mother."

"I called you from Shepard's Inn, Pumpkin. Didn't I tell you?"

You could hear the wet smack when she kissed him. "What's my good boy doing—having a little party?"

"Just a few of the fellows—nothing much."

Only a mother could call somebody like Bill "my good boy."

She came into the living room with this fur wrap slung around her neck. And in the middle of July when it was about one hundred and ten out. She was just that way.

"How are you, Mrs. Butler?" I said. "We're just on our way out. It's awfully nice to see you. How's Mr. Butler? I hear he's doing some fishing in the country. That sounds swell. Really swell." I shook hands with her, smiling my head off. Then she insisted on kissing me.

"Why don't you and your father visit us more often?"

"Well, you know he's in Texas right now."

"I hope he's having a marv——"

"Come on, Pooch, we've got to go."

"I hope I'm not driving you boys away."

"Oh, not at all," I said.

"We were just leaving, Mrs. Butler," Pooch said.

"I think I'll run along myself," said Deacon.

"You look rather ill, Pooch," she said.

"I've had a touch of the flu this week. It kind of knocks you out."

"Well, you ought to be in bed, dear."

"That's where I'm going now, Mrs. Butler."

We all said good night to Bill and took off as fast as we could.

As soon as we got outside Deacon said, "Boy, he'll really get it. Liquor all over the place."

"And that perfume Paula was wearing," I said. "It was enough to kill you."

Maybe it was just my imagination, but as me and Pooch drove away I thought I could hear Mrs. Butler screaming her head off. But maybe I heard a couple of cats fighting in an alley.

"I thought sure she'd know you were drunk, Pooch."

"She sobered me up fast."

We had all the windows open in the car. We drove along fast and the breeze felt good.

"You know something, Owen? You know, it's funny. I'm glad Bill's mother came back when she did."

"Why? He'll be in dutch for a year."

"I don't mean that. It's just that I wasn't really too wild about the whole idea."

I looked over at Pooch.

"You didn't want to do it from the beginning, did you?"

"No."

"I didn't either."

"Why did you go along with it then?"

"I wanted to find out about her for one thing. I guess that's the big reason."

"That's not why I went in on it, Owen."

I didn't say anything.

"That's not why I went in on it."

"Why did you?"

"Because I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I don't know. I was just afraid. I thought maybe a Prone Joan like Paula would help me get over it."

"I used to like her," I said. "I don't know. All I know is I wish in a way I'd banged hell out of her."

"I wish I hadn't got so drunk," Pooch said.

Before we went home we had a cup of coffee and something to eat. Pooch talked a mile a minute about how glad he was that he loved to hunt and fish and all that stuff, and he asked me if I'd come up to his family's cottage for a week end before the summer was over. I said maybe. As we drove home I thought about Barbara. How wonderful she was. Pooch slept all the way home.

19

After that night two things changed for me: I lied to Barbara for the first time by telling her that I'd played poker with Pooch and the guys and I didn't go to Krueger's drugstore any more. I never wanted to see Paula again in my life. And I felt for a while

that I didn't want to run around with Deacon or Bill any more either, but I did see them here and there. I guess I was beginning to change in another way too, because after that night I got over my shyness with Barbara and we began learning quite a few things together. I wasn't the greatest lover going, but she wasn't exactly Gypsy Rose Lee herself.

I'd been getting letters regularly from my old man, and in this one letter he sent me around the end of July, he said he wouldn't be back until the middle of August. He didn't say what was holding him up but it must have been something good, because all his letters were very funny and happy-sounding. He said he'd try and be back in Fleming by the thirteenth, and that he'd fly to save time instead of taking a train up. He asked me about a million questions as usual.

I heard from him two days later from San Antonio. He sent me a post card. It had a color picture of the Alamo, and said: "My dear Son. Very lovely here as you can see. And fiendishly hot. An hour ago I was enjoying this very scene with Anne Proctor, who drove down here with me from Dallas. See you anon. Love, dad."

Even in a three-line post card he managed to get in this person's name. I knew more about what she'd done all summer from what he'd told me in his letters than even what I'd done almost. Anne Proctor this, Anne Proctor that. It really interested me. At first he hadn't mentioned her, and then in one letter he said she was the fashion editor on one of the Dallas newspapers and a friend of Uncle Alden's, and after that he wrote me about her more and more all the time. They seemed to be together all the time. And the funny thing was, the more he talked about her, the more childish his letters sounded, until the last two or three sounded like mine. In the letter that came before the post card he said this Anne Proctor was very anxious to see Fleming and meet me. The idea made me kind of nervous in a way.

I didn't get around to writing him many letters, but I made up for it by sending him millions of post cards: "Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here," and that sort of stuff. I was beginning to miss him a lot, though.

By the first of August Mr. Cannon and Mrs. Kaywoodie had both had their vacations, and business was fairly slow, so I didn't hang around the store. It would have just been a big waste of time. During the last week in July I spent all my time in the back room sleeping off my nights with Barbara.

On August the sixth Barbara's folks left for Lake Forest, Illinois, to visit some friends. They didn't take the car, so our Olds stayed in the garage and I drove her out into the country in her old man's Pontiac. I liked their heap better than ours because it was a convertible, and you could drive along a deserted road on a nice night with the top down and really enjoy yourself, feeling the cold wind on your face and all.

It had been a hot day. I had played tennis with Barbara all day, and the sun had really streamed down. It had been one of the hottest days of the year, and for the first time all summer I had won both sets.

In the late afternoon she saw her folks off. When I went over to pick her up around seven the sky wasn't clear any more; clouds covered the sky and it was dark, and the air was thick and damp.

"D'you still want to go for a ride?" I asked her.

She said yes, and we took off. She seemed in a strange mood. It was still warm out and as we drove along through town we saw some kids in their bathing trunks in the middle of the goddam street playing catch with a beach ball. I had to jam on the brakes and honk the horn. A few blocks farther on down the street a soldier and a sailor were walking along with their arms around this girl who was between them, and all three of them were laughing about something. The girl looked a little like Paula Gionfriddo from a ways away. Then, when we passed them, I saw that the soldier only had one arm. Barbara hadn't noticed. When we got through town we cut off onto Waverly Road and drove into the country.

"What're you thinking about?" I said.

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing at all," she said. "Tired I guess."

I drove out past the airport, and then we were really in the country. Michigan has a certain look that you can't miss. We rode along one of the state highways that leads up into northern Michigan, past rows of tall gray silos and slanting red barns, and we passed signs that said, RED MAN TOBACCO and COPENHAGEN-10¢, and the fields were very flat and yellow with mustard weed, and once in a while we could see a small red brick schoolhouse off the highway a ways. About ten miles outside of Fleming we passed a night church service, or a social or something, and most of the cars parked outside were very old, Model A's and Model T's, and beyond that we saw a farmer sitting in a tractor on a dirt driveway beside a small farmhouse, smoking a pipe. It was pretty quiet out there. It gave you the feeling that nothing could ever change much out there in the country, and that the land and the trees and the houses would be the same forever.

Barbara seemed nervous or angry. She kept looking out the window. I started playing this game with myself, out loud, that hasn't got any name. I made it up all by myself in junior high school when I was bored all the time.

I turned to Barbara and asked her if she remembered Peter Fiske.

"Oh, sure," she said. "He was class president two years ago. I think he's in the Marines now."

"Well, listen to this," I said, I slowed down. I can't drive and talk at the same time. "This is how I used to spend my time in school. Peter——"

"You're quite far out in the road," she said. "I think you're over the white line."

I swung the car back on my side of the road.

"Now listen to me. I just make this up as I go along. Peter Fiske. Fiske tires. I—I tires easily from too much work. You work to make money. Money is the root of all evil. Evil is what the Episcopalians are always talking about. Dr. Coons is an Episcopalian. Dr. Coons is from Fleming. Fleming is the capital of Michigan. Michigan is a state in the Union. Ah—union pants are

what some old men wear under their regular pants. I pants when I look at you——”

“Oh for Godsakes!”

“Come on—let me finish. This is really a lot of fun. Let me see—I pants when I look at you. You are a girl named Barbara Alslinger. Alslinger, R. Lucius, your father, employs men who make clothes. Clothes are what make the man. Man descends from the beast, and one form of beast is the gorilla. There is a gorilla named Gargantua. Ah—Gargantua has a girl friend by the name of Toto. Toto is a female. Bill Butler’s mother is a female whose maiden name is Ford. A Ford is a car. Cars have tires. Some tires are made by Fiske. Peter Fiske.”

I looked at her.

“D’you like it? It’s crazy, isn’t it?”

“I’m not too keen on it right now.”

“Come on, try it. Try it just once.”

“It’s not my cup of tea,” she said.

“Oh, come on,” I said, “don’t be an old party pooper. Give it the old college try, buster.”

“All right—if you want me to.” She had one of those strange, guilty smiles on her face. “Why don’t you turn around and start back? We’re a long ways out in the country, and it’ll be late by the time we get back.”

I waited until there weren’t any cars coming and then I made a U turn.

“Are you going to try my game?” I said. I hoped it would cheer her up or something. “Let’s see real genius at work.”

I decided to drive very slowly on the way back.

“Well, let me see. Radcliffe. I’ll start with the word Radcliffe.”

“D’you mean somebody’s name or the college?”

“The college,” she said. She looked straight ahead and didn’t say anything for a while.

“Well, what’re you waiting for?”

“Radcliffe,” she said, “Radcliffe.” She turned and looked at me. “Radcliffe is a college in the East. East rhymes with yeast. I used to take yeast because my system lacked iron. Iron is a metal—or an

element, I'm not sure which. Anyway, metal is hard. It is hard to tell some people about trips." She put her hand on my shoulder, still looking at me. "I'm taking a trip to the East. Radcliffe is a college in the East where I am going to go on my trip. Radclif——"

"Are you going away to college?"

I didn't realize that while she was talking I'd speeded the car up to seventy miles an hour.

"Yes," she said.

"When?" I asked her. "When are you going?" I was listening to my words and wondering who was saying them. I didn't seem to be saying them.

"I'm leaving in three weeks," she said. "Owen—I meant——"

"That's swell," I said. "So you're going away to college. That sounds just swell."

"Daddy wants me to go. I meant to tell you before—I just didn't know how to say it."

"You'll have a lot of fun," I said. "I know you will. It's a good college, isn't it?"

"I guess it is. I'm going with Amy Bower."

I drove along without saying anything.

"I ought to have told you before."

"That's okay. You'll write me once in a while, won't you?"

"All the time," she said.

"No you won't," I told her. "You won't have time."

"Oh, now Owen!"

"Please," I said, "don't put your arm around me like that. I can't steer when you do that."

"I'm sorry," she said, moving away.

We drove along for a couple of miles without saying anything. I didn't know what to say because I didn't know how I felt, except that I felt all mixed up and very crummy.

"Shall I turn on the radio?" she asked me.

"That's a good idea."

She turned on the radio and we suffered along with Guy Lombardo and his crummy Canadians until I changed the station.

After three hundred goddam commercials Sammy Kaye started playing something, although only God could say what. As if Guy Lombardo wasn't bad enough. Both of those guys could make "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "The Johnston Rag" sound like the same tune. Finally we got something that didn't sound too bad.

"I've got a headache," I said.

"Perhaps night driving does that to you."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't think so."

"It always gives daddy headaches."

"Does it?" I said.

"All the time."

"Well I'm not daddy."

"He gets headaches especially," Barbara said, "if he drives long distances."

I slowed down a little when we got to the airport, which is the city limit on the west side of Fleming. And then right in the middle of "Stardust," a commentator cut in and said: "This broadcast is interrupted for an important news announcement. . . ."

"More stupid war news," I said.

"Why don't you turn to some music?"

"Let's listen to the news," I said. I only said that to disagree with her.

Another commentator who had a very grim and gruff voice, said: "President Truman has announced that an atom bomb has been dropped on Hiroshima. American and British scientists have succeeded in splitting the atom. First reports from Hiroshima claim that thousands of people have been killed; hundreds of houses and buildings completely demolished; that the countryside is in ruins." The guy was very excited. "All commercial broadcasts on this network are suspended until further notice to bring you continuous news of the war. . . ."

I turned off the radio.

"I'm sick of hearing about the war."

"So am I, Owen."

"That's all you ever hear about."

She didn't say anything. She was looking out the window again. I turned off Waverly Road into town.

"Maybe we ought to break up now that you're going away to school."

She didn't say anything.

"I said maybe we should break up."

"I don't know, kid."

"Well you ought to know. You ought to know how you feel."

"You're making everything so difficult."

"I'm not the one who's going away to school!"

"What're you trying to get me to say?"

"To say how you feel."

"But you're making it hard for me to know how I feel."

"Well, I know what'll happen. When you're in college you'll feel too old for me——"

"I don't know why you say that."

"Just watch and see."

"Oh, Owen, for God'sakes!"

"Won't you feel too old for me?"

"How am I expected to answer such a——"

"Won't you feel too old for me?"

"I don't know. I simply don't know."

"You know you'll feel I'm too young."

"I don't know that at all."

I was driving through stop signs and everything.

"You'll meet a lot of college guys."

"Stop it! I don't want to hear any more."

"You'll have all those Harvard freshman to go out with."

"Owen, please!"

"Maybe we ought to break up."

"If you want to," she said.

"Do you want to?"

"I refuse to talk with you any more."

"Do you want to break up?"

"Drop me off at home," she said, "and then leave, I won't talk with you until you make sense."

We didn't say anything more all the way to her house. When we got to her house I kissed her very hard. She let me, but she was very cold. Then I kissed her again—more passionately than I'd ever kissed her before. I was passionate as hell. She just sat there and that really made me mad. All of a sudden I knew I had to try things with her I'd never tried before. When I put my hand under her dress she slapped me across the face.

"Why did you do that?" I said.

"Because you're not making love to me. You hate me right now, and that's why you're doing this."

"That's not true."

"Yes it is! It certainly is! You're trying to be rough and manly and assertive—and you're just making me sick to my stomach."

"You're not doing much to me right now either."

"You'd better grow up a little, Owen."

"Oh, listen to who's talking, for crissake!"

"Good night, Owen," she said. She opened the door and got out. "Will you put the car in the garage, please?" and before I had a chance to answer she was through the gate and running up to the porch. I sat there and watched her go inside the house.

And then I sat there and watched the different lights go on. First the one in the living room, and then two or three lights upstairs. And then, a half an hour or so later, they all went off.

20

Early the next morning I called up Pooch and asked him to come over. It was raining hard outside and there was a lot of thunder and lightning. It was dark like night outside and we went out onto the porch to watch it. I began telling Pooch about Barbara. I thought maybe he could tell me what to do, but as soon as I began telling him I knew it wasn't any good. He wouldn't understand, because even though he'd always been my best friend he didn't like Barbara. Right then I wished I hadn't asked him over, but I couldn't tell him to go away or anything.

"So what happened?" he said. He seemed to be really enjoying the whole thing.

"Oh, nothing much," I said, getting off the porch swing. "D'you want a coke or something?"

"Okay," he said.

I got him a coke from the kitchen, and when I came back I spread myself out on the porch swing.

After a while Pooch said, "Are you going to break up with her?"

"I don't know," I said, lying with my face down on the porch swing. "It was just a quarrel I think."

"Did she give you a hard time?"

"No, it was just a quarrel." I put my hand on the floor and started moving the porch swing back and forth.

I heard him lay his glass down on the floor.

"I'll bet you feel crummy, don't you, Owen?"

I still had my back to him, and I got the porch swing going faster and faster.

"You'd better go away, Pooch. I thought I could talk about it, but I guess I can't."

"It'd be better for you to talk about it."

"I wish you'd go away," I said.

I heard the scrape of the chair as he got up.

"Well," he said, "it wouldn't be the dumbest thing you ever did to break up with her."

I didn't say anything.

"Listen, Owen," he said, "how about coming up to the lake with me for a couple of days? We'll really have a ball. This is a great time of the year for fishing."

"I don't know," I said. "I'll see."

"This week end would be perfect. This would be a perfect week end for—"

"Oh, go away, Pooch. Will you please leave me alone?"

"Well, if you're going to be that way. . . ."

"Don't get P Od. I'll call you tomorrow."

I could hear the front door slam as he went out.

I waited until the porch swing was completely still again before I got up and went to the phone and called Barbara.

At first I wanted to apologize and tell her how stupid I'd been

the night before, but she was very nasty. For one thing I'd left her father's car unlocked and the stupid garage door open, and that didn't help things any. I ended up telling her I couldn't see her next week end because I was going up to Houghton Lake to spend Saturday and Sunday with Pooch. The thing that really P O'd me was, she didn't seem to care.

"Call me when you get back," she said.

"We're supposed to play tennis on Wednesday."

"Oh, I meant to tell you last night—I can't. I'll be busy this week making arrangements for college."

"Okay," I said. "I'll see you next week then."

"Won't you call me before you leave, Owen?"

"Sure, I'll call you." And after that we didn't talk very long.

During the week I got another post card from my old man. It had a picture of the main street in Dallas, and said: "My dear Son. I'll be back next Monday, the 13th. I'm flying up. Still having a wonderful time, and hope you are. Love, dad."

I meant to call Barbara all week but I never did. I figured it wouldn't do either of us any harm to stew a little. The only thing that bothered me was, I didn't know whether she was stewing or not. I was stewing enough for both of us.

Me and Pooch drove up to Houghton Lake in his old man's car on Friday night. It rained all day Saturday, so we stayed in the cottage all day. While I tried to read *This Side of Paradise*, which Barbara had loaned me, Pooch kept butting in with these goddam fish stories about all the fish he'd caught in his life. I believed him for a while, but then he told the same story twice and the second time the fish had grown about eleven feet. Boy, did I razz him about that! I told him it sounded like something right out of *Field and Stream*.

On Sunday morning we went fishing. He got me up at six o'clock, and after breakfast we went down to the tool shed where his father kept the fishing tackle. He walked into the garage and looked through the fishing equipment. When he came out into the yard again, I had my goddam line all snarled up from trying

a few practice casts. Pooch was wearing a large Mexican hat and a windbreaker, which seemed like a stupid idea to me seeing it was so hot out already. He walked up to me whistling "Oklahoma" through his teeth.

"Come on," he said.

"Hey, what am I doing wrong? This casting's a real art."

"You'll always get a backlash that way," Pooch said. "Here—hold it like this. And ride your thumb along the line so it won't snarl on you."

I tried it again and did even worse. The line had about five thousand knots in it. "Well, expert, what do I do now?"

"You might try chess," he said.

"Ha ha ha," I said. "What a wit you are."

Pooch hoisted up his waterproof pants and started down to the lake and along the shore line to the boat. I had to run to catch up with him.

It was already hot out and getting hotter by the minute. All the grass around the cottage was seared brown by the sun and it was still the middle of August. Houghton had really been having a hot spell.

While Pooch warmed up the motor I pushed the boat into the water. I handed my rod and tackle to Pooch and then waded out into the clear, cool water and jumped into the boat. Pooch coiled a rope around the motor and pulled it through the groove, and after about the fifth time it caught and we sped away from the shore. I was sweating already, and it burned the hell out of my eyes.

We left the curving brown shore line and headed out to the middle of the lake. As far as we could see we were the only ones out on the lake. Pooch cut the motor and as we drifted along he told me to steer the boat over to the point where the land jutted into the water in the shape of an L. He took a red, yellow, black and white fly and hooked it onto his line and began to troll. The sun was really getting hot, and the trees on the other side of the point would shimmer and shake if you looked at them long enough.

We anchored at this place called Jordon's Point and fished for over an hour. We didn't catch a goddam thing. I was beginning to feel a little dizzy from the sun; my face and neck and shoulders were beginning to sting a little.

"You should have worn a hat and a jacket," Pooch said. "Maybe next time you'll listen to me."

"How can I get a good sun tan that way, Pooch?"

"You don't fish to get a tan," he said. He looked at me. "No kidding, hey—you'll look awful tomorrow. You might get a stroke or something."

"I feel all right. Why're you so worried about me, anyway?"

"Well," he said, "you're turning red as hell."

I slit the belly of a worm as I rolled it onto my hook. To tell the truth I was getting bored already, and I couldn't help wondering what Barbara would be doing at night. Saturday night, and I was eighty stupid miles away. After I had my hook baited, Pooch showed me how I'd done it all wrong.

"You know something, Pooch? You ought to write a book. A modern *Compleat Angler* or something. I never knew anybody who loves fishing so goddam much."

He started the motor.

"The fishing's no good here," he said. "I know a very good place we can try."

We took off, speeding across the lake, and drifted into an inlet that separated the main part of the lake from a narrow, weedy stream. The sun was way up in the sky by then, and the wind had died away so that you couldn't feel anything but the sun. My ass was baking off.

We baited our lines and began to fish again. We both had strikes right away, but mine didn't amount to anything. Within a half-hour Pooch caught six fish; three speckled bass, two undersized pike and a sunfish which was almost ten inches long. He said he would never keep a fish unless it measured way over the limit, and I told him I'd keep anything I could catch. I'd had one strike so far—and Pooch claimed it was a weed.

"Borrow my jacket for a while," he said.

"I don't need it, thanks."

"You'd better wear it, Owen. You're turning pink."

"I don't need the goddam thing, Pooch."

"Come on, wear it. Don't be stupid. No kidding, hey, if you don't you'll get chills and fever and stay awake all night."

"What're you trying to do, anyway? Be my nursemaid or something?"

"I don't see why you have to be so stubborn."

I'm not stubborn. Why should you give me the jacket when you brought it for yourself?"

"Because I'm browner than you are."

"Well, how in hell will I get brown if I wear the jacket?"

"Okay—be stubborn. But don't say I didn't warn you. Don't blame me if you get a stroke."

"I won't. I promise."

"I'll bet you don't sleep a wink all night," he said.

"My God!" I said, laughing, "what're you driving at, anyway? You're not my keeper, you know."

I didn't know what was eating him, but I was really getting bored out there. I fished for a while longer, then I put my pole under the seat and stood up. I stretched out my arms and rolled my eyes around like a wild man.

"Hey, you're rocking the boat," Pooch said.

"'O! that this too solid flesh would melt,'" I said. "'Thaw and resolve itself into a dew . . .'"

"You're rocking the boat, you moron."

"—Cool dew! Then I could fish the whole goddam day through, for eels and bluegills and elusive perch too, I'll give you a big fat clue, without fear of my flesh being stewed!" I sat down and looked at Pooch. I felt like I was going crazy from the heat. "Pooch, old man, I've finally seen the light. My great life's work is before me. I've decided to spend my entire life doing free translations of Shakespeare. Free in form, I mean. And I'll call my work *Shakespeare for the Millions* by Sir Owen Harrison Harding."

"Sir Owen, the moron."

"Or—*How to Fish Though Too Damn Cultured to Care for It*

by that amiable angler, Owen Harding Walton. What d'you think of that?"

"Not one hell of a lot."

"Just what I expected. Just what I expected from——"

"Come on, knock it off," he said. "The fish can hear us."

"Might humanize them a little, Pooch. They're pretty cold-blooded."

"For crissake, will you shut up?"

Even Pooch wasn't catching anything any more, and after a while I think he was getting to be just as bored as I was. The fishing was lousy, and the sun was really awful.

Pooch turned to me.

"What's going to happen between you and Barbara?" he asked me.

"I don't know, Pooch. She's going East to college. I don't really know." I doused my face with water. "Tell me the truth—do you think she'll find another guy?"

"Sure I do, Owen. What the hell, you've got to realize you're younger than she is."

"I'm not so goddam much younger——"

"Yes you are," he said. "Not in age, maybe, but it takes a guy a lot longer to get started. It'll be two years yet before you can even start college."

"She'll wait, Pooch. I know she will. I'm pretty sure."

He smiled. "Don't be too sure, my boy."

And then, somehow, I knew I didn't want to talk about it with him any more. He didn't seem to know how I felt. A year ago he would have known how I felt about most anything, but now something had changed. I trailed my hand in the water, and looked out across the lake.

"The fish sure as hell aren't biting," I said.

"You said it."

"Is the fishing usually this bad?"

"I told you about ten times the fishing's usually damn good," Pooch said. He sounded P Od.

Over in the west the sky was full of black clouds and they were

moving in on the lake. Pooch quit fishing. He took a penknife out of his tool chest and snipped off his hook.

"The air's getting clammy," he said. He looked up at the sky. "We may have some rain before we know it." He put his hands up to his eyes to form a sort of visor and looked at the sky for a while.

"Come on, Captain Ahab," I said. "Let's go before we get soaked."

Pooch turned to me with a smile on his face. But you could tell he was nervous about something, because he kept cracking his knuckles.

"I've got something I want to show you back at the cottage," he said.

"What is it?"

"A rifle," he said. "It's dad's prize rifle and he said I could use it this winter." Pooch bridged his fingers over his eyes, still looking at me. "When we get back to the cottage I want to show you how to use it. You said you always wanted to know——"

"Well, thanks, Pooch. Thanks."

"I'll show you how to use it," he said. "Then maybe this winter you can go deer hunting with me."

"I would like to try it sometime."

"You'll have all the time in the world," he said, "now that you're breaking up with Barbara. We could spend Christmas vacation in the north woods."

"Who says I'm breaking up with her?" I said. He made me mad, taking something for granted like that. "I didn't say we were breaking up—we've just had an argument, is all."

"Well, you should break up with her," Pooch said, "before she beats you to it."

"Listen, Pooch, we're not breaking up. I don't know why you keep saying we are." I doused my face with water again. It took the burn out of my skin. "You're sure as hell acting strange today."

He leaned toward me.

"Listen, Owen—did you ever sleep with her?"

I looked at him for a long time, and wondered what the hell he was getting at.

"Pooch, I hate to say this—but it's none of your business."

"You didn't though, I'll bet, did you?"

"Look, it's going to rain any second. Let's get out of here."

He started the motor and white foam shot out from behind the boat. I pulled up the anchor and picked the seaweed off it. The motor sputtered a few times, and Pooch pulled out the choke and let it idle for a while. It wasn't feeding right.

"Put the tackle and hooks in the box," he said, "and the poles under the seat. We'll start back now and buy you some salve in town. You need it."

"I guess I do," I said.

Over in the west the sky was all black where this sudden summer storm had blown up. It was blowing right over the lake. As Pooch cut across the lake the water was choppy and whitecaps had come up all over, making the whole lake look white. Within a half-hour the lake had completely changed, like a smooth mirror that's been shattered to pieces.

"They blow up like this in the summer," Pooch said. "Swift as hell."

A few drops of rain began to fall. The brown shore line curved into view, and we headed for it at full speed.

"Boy, look at it come down now," I said. "You're lucky you've got that hat."

"Here, take it."

"No, it's yours, Pooch. You brought it for yourself."

We pulled the boat onto the sand and covered it with this greasy tarpaulin. The sun went out of the sky, then, and the sky over the lake was one black wall.

It was raining harder by the time we tied down the tarp. In a few seconds we were soaked through our clothes. We stood in the rain for a few seconds, and then Pooch said, "Come on. Let's run for it."

We ran for the shelter of the rocky hills. The beach was about a mile long, and we were both out of breath when we climbed into the dry cave. The rain ran down the rocks and made it hard to see

anything outside the cave. It was dark in the cave and colder than outside, and we could see our breath steaming.

"If it clears up you should have good fishing this afternoon," I said. "I hope you catch a whale or two—maybe Moby Dick's visiting these parts."

"What d'you mean, Owen? You're staying around, aren't you?"

"No, I've got to be back early. My old man's coming home tomorrow, and I ought to be there when he comes."

"You were going to stay and drive back with me in the morning."

"I don't think I ought to stay."

Pooch looked very annoyed. We sat there in the cave without saying anything for a while. I was beginning to shiver like hell.

"You know, Owen? . . . I've been thinking . . ."

"What about?"

"Oh, lots of things. About you and me," he said. "We used to talk about doing a lot of things together. We were always making plans about the things we were going to do when we got the chance. We were going to do things like this—and go hunting in the north woods." He walked to the mouth of the cave and looked outside. "And then we were going to go to college together. When we got the money we thought we might build a little cabin in the Upper Peninsula and spend our vacations there. I was going to teach you how to hunt, remember?" He turned around and looked at me. "I would still like to do all those things," he said.

I scraped some mud off my shoes. "It sounds nice," I said. "It really does sound nice, Pooch, but I guess things change. After a while people begin to grow up and they change."

He walked over to me.

"You mean that was all just kid's talk? All the things we planned to do?"

"I didn't say that, Pooch."

Pooch lit a match and for a minute the whole cave was bright. His face was very white above the flame of the match.

"When people begin to grow up," he said, "they don't seem to be honest any more. They make goddam fools out of themselves."

"I don't know about that, Pooch."

"Take yourself," he said. "You and Barba——"

"I wish you'd keep quiet."

"All right," he said, "I will then."

We were quiet for a while.

But I felt I had to talk. I was getting nervous. I walked over beside him and said, "You make growing up sound like a crummy deal. It isn't, though. Look at you—you've got a lot to look forward to. Your family has money—they can send you to college. Why, think of all the people that haven't got money. And you're a damn good athlete. What more do you want?"

The rain began to fall off, and we could see through the mouth of the cave that it was beginning to get lighter outside.

"I don't want to grow up," Pooch said. "I want everything the way it used to be. I want it to stay the way it was."

I sat there looking down at my shoes. I didn't know what the hell to say.

"It's letting up now," Pooch said.

I stood up and walked past him, out into the open.

"I think I ought to be getting back to town," I said.

"I suppose you should," Pooch said.

We started the long walk back to the cottage. We walked along without saying anything. The rain had brought the temperature way the hell down and my skin wasn't burning any more.

"I'll catch the afternoon bus, Pooch."

"It's the only goddam one that leaves this week end."

I stopped along the path we were taking and peeled a section of dead bark off from a fallen tree. The bark was covered with bright green moss. I heaved the bark as far as I could down the path in front of us.

"Look, Pooch—I hope we're always friends. But you've got to see that friendships change—you get older and everything. I care a lot for Barbara, Pooch, and maybe if we went on some double dates you'd——"

"Forget about it," Pooch said.

"I was only trying to explain."

"Forget about it."

"Won't you let me tell you how I feel?"

He wouldn't answer me.

Before the bus came we played horseshoes and Pooch won. We played eleven games and Pooch won them all except one. It was a very hot afternoon.

21

When I got home that night I went right to bed. In ten minutes or so I was asleep, but I kept waking up all night out of these very strange dreams. The dreams were about a lot of heads floating through my mind like balloons, and they didn't make any sense at all. One of the heads was Barbara's and another, smiling, head belonged to Pooch, and this other head that ran through most of the dreams was my father's, and I remember seeing Paula's head once, and in one of the dreams Bill Butler was standing beside me watching all the heads float by. It sure was strange. Finally the dreams stopped, and when I woke up the next time it was noon and the phone was ringing.

It was my old man and he wanted me to drive out to the airport and pick him up. I got up and went out there without eating breakfast or anything. On the way home from the airport we kept butting in on each other, talking about everything we'd been doing in the last seven weeks. Boy, he looked good! His face was tanned very dark; he'd gained at least ten pounds, and his eyes were very bright in a happy and healthy way. I don't think I ever saw him looking so good. There was only one thing that I kept wondering about, though. He seemed nervous as all hell about something.

When we got home I parked the heap beside the curb, and we walked in the house together. "I kind of wish I'd gone with you," I said. "You must have had a great time. You didn't climb any mountains or anything, did you?"

He shook his head no.

I asked him how Uncle Alden's newspaper was holding up and all that stuff, but I didn't listen to any of the answers. I thought it was polite to ask him a lot of questions, but I was too glad to see

him to really listen to anything he said. He made himself a manhattan. When he drank it, I noticed that his hand was shaking.

After I helped him unpack his trunks in the bedroom upstairs, we sat down on the twin beds opposite each other.

"Owen," he said, "I'd like to take you out to dinner this afternoon. Why don't you put on that nice tweed suit of yours?"

"Where're we going?"

"The City Club," he said as he lit his pipe.

"Okay, Dad. I'll be with you in a flash." I went into my room and got dressed. I didn't wear my tweed suit, though. In the last two or three months I'd grown into Paul's clothes, so I put on his gray flannel pants, and wore this heavy salt-and-pepper jacket of his, which was very good-looking except the shoulder pads sagged over my shoulders a little.

When I went downstairs he was pacing back and forth in the living room. He was smoking a cigar.

"You look like one of the absent members of this family," he said, smiling at me. "Do you think Paul will mind?"

"I don't know, Dad. Do you?"

"We'll ask him when he comes home."

"I hope he doesn't mind."

"I'm sure he won't," my father said as he sat down on the davenport. "I expect that you wrote him while I was away—didn't you, old man?"

"Oh sure, Dad. Sure I did. I wrote him three times."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. "It's reassuring to know that there's at least one member of our family with any degree of volubility." He crushed out his cigar in the ash tray. "I think we'd better be going, Owen. I'd hate to keep the third member of our dinner party waiting."

"Keep who waiting?"

"A friend of mine," he said, getting up from the davenport. "Anne Proctor. I believe I wrote you about her"

"You mean she came up here with you?"

"Yes—we flew up together."

"Is she on her vacation or something?"

"Yes," he said.

"Boy, this is sure a dull place to spend a vacation!"

"Are you ready to leave, old man?"

"Sure," I said.

He stripped the cellophane off a fresh cigar, and after playing with the cigar a while he lit it. He was very nervous.

"Is she from Texas?" I asked him. "I mean originally?"

"No, she's from Hartford. She's lived in Texas for the past eight years."

"I'm anxious to meet her," I said. "How come you didn't bring her over with you?"

"She had to make arrangements to stay at the Olds for the week. She said she'd just as soon walk across the street and meet us at the City Club." He puffed very hard on his cigar. "I think we'd better go if you're ready."

We walked outside.

"Did she come up for any special reason, Dad?"

"You certainly ask a lot of questions," he said.

He seemed sort of annoyed.

"I don't mean to. I'm just interested, is all."

When we got out to the car my old man stopped and looked at the lawn, and the hedges along the driveway, and the evergreens and flowers in front of the house.

"I wish tomorrow morning you'd mow the lawn," he said. "Our house is beginning to resemble a wild-game preserve."

"Okay. It's as good as done."

"You'd better put the basket on the lawn mower," he said. "There's too much grass to leave scattered all around."

"Okay, Dad."

We got in the car and started driving downtown. My old man drove. For the first time in my life I realized that he wasn't the best driver going. He didn't seem to know what stop signs were for, and he didn't pay much attention to the color of lights. On the way downtown I wanted to ask him more questions about this Anne Proctor, but I figured I'd better not. He seemed so nervous

he might have smashed into a bus or tried to climb up a telephone pole.

We met her right away inside the lobby of the City Club. I was getting nervous myself. My hands were cold and clammy.

"Anne—this is my son Owen."

Her face was thin and kind of odd-looking, and her hair was black without any gray in it at all, but when she smiled her whole face seemed to light up. She looked a lot like those illustrations of Jane Eyre in that leather-bound book my mother used to own. I only looked at her for a second, and then I bit this bloody hangnail off my thumb.

"—And Owen, this is Miss Proctor—Anne." His voice was very soft and high, almost a whisper.

"How are you?" I said. She stuck out her hand, with a white glove on it, and I shook hands with her.

"I'm awfully glad to know you, Owen."

"Me too. I'm glad to know you."

"I've heard so much about you."

"You have? Good things I hope."

"Oh, very good," she said. "I heard that you ran the bookstore for your father while he was away. And that——"

"I didn't run it. I just worked part time."

"Oh," she said. "Oh, yes. . . ."

All three of us stood there not saying anything.

Then we got a table. We sat there at the table very silent. I started squirming around in my seat. My fingernails were dirty, so I had to keep my hands in my lap. We all sighed with relief when the waiter came. Boy, he really looked good right then! We all smiled at him at once. My father ordered for all of us—duck dinners for me and him, and eggs Benedict with hollandaise sauce for Anne Proctor. She said she wasn't awfully hungry. She didn't look like she was, either. She looked very pale. After the waiter went away, none of us could think of anything to say again. And then with this quick leg movement that rocked the table and spun the water glasses all around, my father got out of his chair.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he said, chewing on his cigar. "I

want to pick up a box of cigars across the street—they have these kind——” He waved this wet stump of cigar at us, and we both stared at it. “My favorite brand,” he said. He put his napkin on the table. “Listen, why don’t you two get acquainted while I’m gone?” And then he walked away before we had a chance to say we didn’t know how to, or we weren’t quite ready to, or something.

Anne Proctor drank down her water in one long swallow. I was watching her out of the corner of my eye. And she kept bringing the glass up to her mouth after there wasn’t any water left in it. She did that about ten times. I was getting nervous watching her, so I started fiddling around with the silverware. I arranged my old man’s and my silverware in all kinds of patterns, and moved the pieces around my side of the table. I felt very foolish and young. Suddenly I did the stupidest thing going. I brought my hand down hard on one of the spoons and it went sailing, end over end, across the table, just missing Anne Proctor’s nose, and landed with a loud clatter on the floor. I could have died right then.

“I don’t know how that happened,” I said, trying to smile. “Here—I’ll pick it up.”

“Never mind, Owen. It’s right here at my feet.” She picked up the spoon and handed it to me.

“Thank you very much,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” she said, lifting this empty glass to her mouth again.

Boy, that began to bother me! I wondered if she knew the glass was empty. I watched her do it again, and then I shoved my glass of water over to her.

“Drink mine. I’m not feeling thirsty.”

“Oh, thanks ever so much,” she said, smiling. She played with the glass and looked down at the tablecloth.

Then she looked up at me and said, “When does school start, Owen?”

“In about three weeks,” I said. “Right after Labor Day.”

She drank down the whole glass of water in one swallow again, and wiped the napkin across her mouth very daintily, with her little finger sticking up in the air. Just like Barbara would do. I

wondered if I ought to pass my father's water over to her. I didn't.

"I hear you have a girl," she said.

"Oh, sort of," I said. I'd written my old man all about Barbara in one of my letters. "Sort of, I guess."

"That's nice."

"Her name's Barbara Alslinger," I said in a very loud voice. "I'll bet you'd like her. But, you see, she's going away to school in a couple of weeks. She's going to Radcliffe."

"Well," she said, "you'll have to talk your father into sending you to Harvard."

"I guess so," I said. "I don't know. I guess I won't be going with her much longer."

"Why d'you say that?"

"That's a long ways away," I said, "and she'll find somebody else to go with."

"Did she tell you she would?"

"No, but she will. I'm pretty sure she will."

"Did you tell her she'd find someone else?"

"I did in a way."

"Oh, you oughtn't to have done that, Owen—if you'll excuse my advising you like this."

"Go on," I said. "I don't mind advice." I was beginning to like her a lot.

"Well, most girls—and women, too, for that matter—respect a man who's strong, especially when they have to be parted for any length of time." She smiled at me. "It's the woman's prerogative to cry or make a scene at such times. I think it would be poor policy for you to make it even more difficult for her than it already is."

"Do you really?" I said.

"Yes I do, Owen."

"Well, thanks for the advice—thanks very much, Anne—Miss Proctor. . . ."

"Oh, please call me Anne."

"All right," I said. "All right, Anne."

We were embarrassed again, and couldn't think of anything to talk about. My cheeks were hot; I must have been blushing a little.

She was blushing.

Just when I thought my old man was never coming back, he came strolling in. He apologized for being gone so long, and when he asked me to please pass the salt, old man, I could smell liquor on his breath. Then I knew what he'd done; he'd gone to the bar on purpose so we'd be alone together for a while. He could be very clever.

The dinner took a little over six years. During dinner my father and Anne did most of the talking, and I just sat there and listened.

"Delicious food!"

"It's a fine club. One of our best."

"Fleming's certainly cleaner than Dallas!"

"Well, that may be, but Dallas is bigger—more modern."

"The weather is simply *grand* up here."

"Say, you're right about the food. It is good."

"Yes, it certainly is!"

"Well, it's really a fine old club."

Boy, it was awful. But the meal finally ended, and Anne excused herself to go out and powder her nose or something.

"Pass the cream, Dad."

"Cream? Oh yes, cream. Here you are, old man."

He had Camembert cheese with his coffee, and I had hot apple pie and milk. Anne hadn't ordered anything.

"Well, Owen——?"

I looked up at him with about half of the scalding pie in my mouth. I waved my hand at him that I couldn't talk for a minute.

"I'm glad to see you again, Owen. I've missed you very much."

"I've missed you too, Dad," I said, washing down the pie with my milk. "You're looking very good."

"Do you really think so?"

"I sure do. You've gained some weight, haven't you?"

"A few pounds," he said. He stared at a piece of cheese and cracker he had in his hand. "I've cut down on the drinking quite a bit."

"You have? That's fine, Dad. I'm very glad to hear that." I wondered how much he'd cut down, though.

He looked at me with this piece of cheese and cracker halfway up to his mouth. He never ate it. As he kept looking at me, his hand slowly sank back down to his plate.

"How do you like her, Owen?"

"Anne?" I said. I told him that she told me to call her Anne. "I think she's really tops. I like her a lot."

"Do you really mean that?" he asked me.

"Sure I do. She seems to be a swell person."

He looked at me for a long time. He wasn't smiling.

"You don't know how happy you're making me," he said. "I can't tell you."

He reached across the table and put his hand on mine. He looked into my eyes for a long time. "We're thinking of getting married," he said, speaking every word slowly. "Not now. Not right away. But sometime in the future."

He took off his glasses and rubbed his napkin across them with a kind of slow, thoughtful rhythm. They were steamed up, and as I watched him clean them I tried to understand how I felt. I didn't know how I felt except that she seemed very nice, and that he'd probably quit running around and drinking so much if they got married. It bothered me a little in some way that I couldn't quite understand, but I sure wasn't going to let him know it.

"Of course, Owen, you realize that I wouldn't marry her without your permission."

"Oh—you have that," I said. "You've got that."

"You mean you don't have any qualms?" He put on his glasses and slowly adjusted them. "You don't have any qualms at all about your mother?"

"No," I said, not knowing if I was telling the complete truth. "I'm sure she'd want it that way, Dad." I couldn't help thinking right then of the time I heard them talking in the bedroom. I drank down the rest of my milk, and tried to look very happy.

"I've already told Paul," he said. "I wrote him a letter two weeks ago."

"Have you heard from him yet?"

"He congratulated me," my father said. "He sent me a short note congratulating me."

"I'm glad of that," I said, not looking at him.

"It was awfully nice to hear from him."

I nodded my head.

"Look here, old man—you don't think she's too young for me do you?"

"How old is she?" I asked him.

"She'll be thirty-two in November."

"That sounds pretty old to me," I said, and then I thought maybe that was the wrong thing to say because my father's forty-five. I smiled at him. "I mean she sounds just the right age to me. When d'you think—well, when's it going to happen?"

"We haven't set a date," he said. He lit another one of his cigars. "Do you feel that sometime late this year, say around November, would be too soon?"

"I don't know why it would be too soon."

"We were thinking of sometime around her birthday."

"That sounds fine, Dad."

He was blowing out black clouds of smoke. I wondered if the City Club had to air out the place after people like my father finished smoking their cigars. It's funny the things you think about at the most important times. Anne came back then, and we drove home. She liked our house. She said it reminded her of her father's house in Hartford. She said her father lived in the house that Mark Twain used to live in, and so I decided that our house must not be so bad, after all. The ice was broken and we got along fine. Before she left at ten o'clock, she promised me that sometime during the week she would meet Barbara and also teach me how to play chess. I was really sorry to see her leave. My father drove her downtown to the Olds, and when I decided to go to bed at midnight he still wasn't back.

I was just about asleep when I heard the car in the driveway. A couple of minutes later I heard him walking upstairs. He knocked on my door.

I told him to come in.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" he asked me, standing in the doorway.

"No. I just went to bed."

"Do you mind if I turn on the light a minute?"

"The ceiling light's burned out, Dad," I said. "Here—I'll turn on this one." I turned on the reading light beside my bed. "I'll clean the globe and put in a new bulb in the morning," I told him.

He sat down in the chair beside my bed.

We talked for a while about all kinds of things. I was getting sleepy but I tried not to show it, and every time I started to yawn I managed not to.

And then he finally said, "Owen—I have a special favor to ask you."

"What is it?" I said.

"Well, if you don't mind—I've been giving this a lot of thought, Owen, and I'd like you to be best man if you don't mind."

"You mean at your wedding?"

"Yes," he said.

"You mean you want me to be best man at your wedding?" I said, sitting up in bed. I just looked at him.

"Would you mind?"

"Oh, no. . . . Gosh, no."

"I could use the moral support," he said.

"Has that ever been done before?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "Anne thinks it's an excellent idea and so do I. That's really all that matters."

"Sure. Nothing else matters but that."

"Then you'll do it, old man?"

I told him I'd love to do it. I'd really love to.

"That's settled then," he said with a sigh. He got up and walked over to the door. "I won't keep you up any longer."

"You weren't keeping me up, Dad."

"Well, it's probably time you were asleep anyway."

I looked at the Big Ben on the table beside my bed and it was a quarter of one. I thought that if he knew how late I stayed up

most of the time, he'd really be surprised. He never did know very much about me, or about what I was up to.

"Dad—why does she have to stay at the Olds? Why can't she stay here with us?"

He took off his glasses and looked at them.

"That might not be considered too proper, Owen." He smiled at me and then said good night and left the room. I turned out the light.

I turned over on my left side and tried to go to sleep. I could hear the water running in the bathroom. I listened to the running water and thought about Anne and my father and my mother. I wondered if Anne and my mother would have been good friends. I hoped they would have been good friends. And then I could almost feel myself going to sleep, and the dark closing in around me, and that was the last sound I heard before I went to sleep—the running water.

22

The next day started out like any other day.

I got up early in the morning and mowed the lawn. The wind was blowing hard and I was kind of chilly in my T shirt, but the sky was clear and the sun was coming down brightly so that by the time I finished the lawn I was sweating.

Around noon I went downtown to the store and shot the breeze with Mrs. Kaywoodie and Mr. Cannon and my father for a while, and when Anne came in about an hour later I went for a walk with her. She wanted to see Fleming. I told her there wasn't much to see, but I took her to the State Capitol Building where we spent a boring hour staring at Civil War relics. Then we took a look at Austin Blair who stood out on the lawn in front of the Capitol Building, all covered with green mold. He was a big hero governor of Michigan during the Civil War. I always wondered why, if he was such a big hero, he didn't get cleaned off once in a while. He looked like a pretty funny hero all covered with green mold. Anne knew more about him than I did, and it was very interesting to listen to her talk about Michigan history. She knew nearly as

much about it as my old man did. At two-thirty she went back down to the store, and I went home.

When I got home I called Barbara and we had a very pleasant talk. I tried to do what Anne said, not to act jealous or stupid, and it worked like a charm. She was anxious to see me, and so I made a date with her for that night. As soon as I hung up I shined my shoes. I listened to a Ravel piano concerto that Barbara had given me, while I shined my loafers and my black shoes.

The day began just like any other day, but before it was over it was the maddest, craziest day I'd ever seen, and Fleming was louder than it had ever been before and probably ever will be again.

At around six o'clock I turned on the radio, and that was the last time until early the next morning that I had any idea what time it was.

It was the same on every station:

"The war's over!"

"The war's over!"

"THE WAR'S OVER! THE WAR'S OVER! THE WAR'S OVER!"

I got dressed as fast as I could and rushed out into the street. You never heard so much shouting and screaming, and all the church bells were ringing, and it couldn't have been very long before everybody in town knew the war was over, and then all hell really broke loose. When I got downtown there were already hundreds and maybe thousands of people milling around. The noise got louder and louder all the time, and when it couldn't get any louder it got one hell of a lot louder. There were thousands of horns honking in hundreds of different keys, and shouts and screams all around me, and you could hear bugles blaring and bass drums booming and shrill whistles screeching like fighting cats, and there were crowds of people running every whichway, running and pushing like they knew where they were going, but nobody knew where he was going. It made New Year's seem like a summer day in the country—even at the beginning.

When I got to the main drag, beside Woolworth's, I remembered I had a date with Barbara. On the main drag there were

people carrying bottles of booze, some of them already drunk. Main Street and Michigan Avenue were crowded with people. Cars had to be routed down side streets. More people were pouring downtown all the time, and I almost got killed trying to push through the crowd. When I got into a phone booth to call Barbara, there was a bonfire burning in the middle of the street.

"Hello?" she said. "Hello?"

Her voice sounded very faint and faraway.

"I'm downtown," I said, "it's hard to move around. Can you meet me?"

"I'm in my cups," she said. "I'm finishing off a bottle of wine."

"Take a drink for my brother," I said.

"I've taken many many drinks for your brother."

"What'd you say? I can't hear anything."

"I said I've been drinking to your brother—for your brother!"

"Fine. Look——"

"I wrote a poem too. As soon as I heard the news I wrote a poem."

"That's great. Look, bring it along and meet me down here."

"Down where?" Her voice was so faint I had to strain to hear it.

"Where shall I meet you?"

"On the southeast corner of Michigan Avenue. Next to Woolworth's."

"All right," she said.

"Barbara?"

"Yes?"

"Don't forget to bring the poem," I said.

"And the wine."

"Yes, and the wine."

"Okay—I'll see you kid. V for victory!"

"V for victory," I said.

Somebody was pounding on the glass door of the booth. I went back into the street. Police were putting up road blocks. Now there were three or four fires in the street. A band was playing somewhere but I couldn't see it. A sack of water landed at my feet and splattered to pieces. There were some people standing in the

window of an insurance building throwing sacks of water at people. I tried to hurry along but you kept getting held back by the crowd. On the corner of Main Street and Michigan Avenue there weren't any cars except police cars and fire engines, and a boy and a girl standing on the running board of one of the fire engines necking.

I ran into Bill and Deacon and Herby right then.

"Where's Pooch?" I said.

"He's still up at the lake," Herby said. "I called his house."

"The poor bastard's missing all the excitement," Deacon said.

"Well, that's the way the ball bounces," Bill said.

"If we stand in one place too long," I said, "we'll get killed."

We couldn't talk any more; we were just pushed along.

"Hey, look at that guy!" Deacon shouted.

There was an old guy standing on the edge of the roof of Hart's clothing store playing a violin. We watched him for a minute and then we seemed to be swept away. There were girls standing around being kissed by long lines of boys. Bill saw Mary Zeller and ran across the street. There were guys lined up halfway across the street waiting to kiss her. And this middle-aged woman was sitting in the middle of the street—right in the middle of the goddam town—with her dress pulled over her head. A Forty-and-eight car was creeping slowly along, jang-clanging jang-clanging, with a lot of drunk, red-faced old men in American Legion caps, shouting and whistling at girls, and this one guy let out a big war whoop and fell off into the street. Someone yelled that he was bleeding. A couple of cops carried him away.

The noise and the pushing and all the people made you feel crazy.

My head was spinning.

And people were screaming,

"The war's over!"

"Thank God it's over!"

"It's over! it's over!"

"The war to end all wars——"

"Praise-se the Lord and pa-ass the ammunition!——"

"Over there, over there—dada-daaaaaaaa! dada-daaaaaaaa! dada-daaaaaaaa!"

A guy was standing on top of a car leading a bunch of people in "God Bless America," and he was using an umbrella for a baton. Then somebody yelled that somebody was killed. An ambulance was creeping through the crowd. But he wasn't dead; his face was bloody and he was shivering like he was cold. "The son of a bitch was a German!" "A lousy German!" "The guy was a kraut all right, Schmidt or something. . . ." I was up close to the ambulance when they put him inside. He was a very black colored fellow. I looked up at the sky for a second and it was white and full of moving things. For a second I thought of snow and winter; toilet paper in long streams and ticker tape filled the sky. Then I remember I hadn't said what time I was going to meet Barbara, and I didn't have any idea what time it was anyway. My watch had stopped. Very slowly I moved through the crowd, back to Woolworth's. She was standing in the shadows by the door, her hands in the pockets of her trench coat.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, kid."

I kissed her on the forehead. Then she put her arms around me and we held each other close.

She brought a bottle out of the pocket of her trench coat.

"New and unopened," she said. She reached in her pocket again. "And a corkscrew."

"Are you drunk?" I asked her.

"Just a little tipsy."

"Shall we brave the crowd for a while?"

She put her hand in mine, and we started off.

When we got over to the Capitol lawn we saw the strangest thing that happened all night. A young girl, very drunk, had her arms around old Austin Blair and was trying to give him a drink from her bottle. She was about half undressed, and I'll bet the governor never had such a wild time while he was alive. While we stood there watching her, a cop came up and dragged her off the statue and carried her away.

The cops were beginning to walk around with clubs in their hands. Order came back slowly. It was getting late and people were starting to go home.

We walked away from the noise, east on Main Street toward Barbara's house. We walked along very slowly and stopped every once in a while to take a drink from the bottle. We passed a gas station that was still open, and I stopped.

"I think I'll call my folks," I said.

"Your folks?"

"I mean my dad."

We went inside the gas station and I called home. As I talked to my father I could hear a lot of noise in the background. The Harts were over there and so were some other people. Dad said he wasn't very drunk but I could tell he was. I told him I was very drunk, but I wasn't drunk at all. He sounded very happy, and kept saying Paul's name and mom's name over and over again. He got Anne to the phone and I talked to her for a little while, and then she talked to Barbara. Anne asked us to come over, but it was pretty late and I said I'd bring Barbara over for dinner tomorrow night.

When we were through talking we had to talk to the gas station attendant. He was drunk and wanted somebody to talk to. He kissed Barbara and gave us a drink of whisky. Before we left he made me take this new kind of gearshift handle for my car. He said his brother designed it. It was shaped like a skeleton. I told him I didn't have a car but he didn't believe me, so I stuck the handle in my pocket and thanked him very much. After he took a drink of our wine we left.

We walked down to the river.

"What time is it?" I said.

"Three-thirty," she said. "What's wrong with your watch, Owen?"

"I forgot to wind it."

"It's three thirty-two," she said, as I set my watch. "Almost daylight."

"Boy, the night's really gone fast," I said.

"It doesn't seem that late at all," Barbara said.

We walked onto the wooden bridge and we could hear the river below us. Barbara leaned way over and spit in the river.

"Now you don't feel like a prude," I said.

"I haven't felt prudish in a long time, my boy."

She spit into the river again and then turned to me, laughing, and kissed me very hard.

"Let's sit down right here on the bridge," she said, "and finish the wine."

"And watch the sun come up," I said.

"Roger, kid. We'll have the wine and the sun all to ourselves."

We sat down and I lit a cigarette, my last one.

It was warm out there, and there wasn't any wind, and we sat close together without saying anything.

I flicked my cigarette into the river.

"How about reading me that poem of yours?"

"It's too dark."

"I'll keep lighting matches for you."

She reached into her pocket and brought out a small piece of paper and unfolded it.

"I want you to know this isn't my usual kind of poem."

"No excuses now."

She read it very softly while I kept lighting one match after another.

"The war is over;
those shots have stopped.
Will there be a peace?

The war is over;
now that favorite hymn,
the politician's din;
shall be heard again.
But will there be a peace?
Will they let us rest in peace?"

She looked at me and smiled.

"It isn't too good, is it, Owen?"

"I don't know," I said. "Your're right about it not being like your others."

She slowly tore it up and threw it in the river.

"I'd better stick to the things I know," she said. "Or wait until I meet someone who's been in the war."

We drank down the rest of the wine. Barbara moved closer to me. We sat for a long time, close like that. I put my arm around her and she leaned against me. It was getting warmer and the sky was getting light. The Grand canoe cabin, down below us, was white again as the sun was about ready to come up and the sky got brighter.

"I love you," I said. "And I'm not supposed to say it, I know, but I guess nothing else says quite the same thing."

"I love you too," she said.

She ran her fingers across my mouth.

"I'm not sure what it means, Owen, but if it means wanting to be with someone then I love you."

"You know something?" I said.

"What?"

"You're beginning to call me Owen."

She smiled at me.

"Well, haven't I always?"

"No. You've called me just about everything except Owen." I held her hand. "I'm glad you call me Owen now. It makes me more sure than anything else that you really do love me."

She turned to me.

"You think of things in the funniest way, kid."

"I know I do, buster."

We laughed.

A few minutes later the sun came up behind the birch trees on our side of the river. The sky was full of color; red and yellow and orange and blue, and streaks of lavender. We stood up and stretched. The first day of peace was going to be beautiful and bright.

(Continued from front flap)

be luckier for Owen than for the rest: he met Barbara Alsinger ("That was the first time in my life I'd ever shaken hands with a girl") and felt, even on that first day, that she probably was going to make a big difference in the way things worked out from then on.

This warmhearted and high-spirited new novel is filled with laughter and youth . . . and pathos too, for not everything worked out happily. This is the sort of book that is going to really hit home if you were ever an adolescent boy . . . and if you weren't, you're going to learn a lot.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Ellison, who is twenty-five, was born in Lansing, Michigan, and lives at present in New York. He has this to say about his work: "Since Jane Austen, Mark Twain, E. M. Forster, and F. Scott Fitzgerald are the authors for whom I have the greatest affection, this first novel of mine follows naturally. 'To see life steady and see it whole,' as Forster said, is what they did and what I hope to do."

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